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SPECIAL AWARD OF MERIT

The Special Award of Merit in EQMM's Twelfth Annual Contest was won by Mr. B. J. R. Stolper—with a truly distinguished story of an ethnological group entirely new to the detective field. For this prize-winning story is a tale of detection, in the neoclassic manner, about a colony of Bessarabian Jews who have their own little quarter in New York City.

We think you will be fascinated by the background and the characters in "Lilith, Stay Away From the Door." The people, steeped in Talmudic and Chassidic lore, are intensely religious, and their customs and superstitions are exactly the same as they were, long ago, in the oppressive ghettoes of Rumania. Out of their rich, dark beliefs Mr. Stolper has drawn a vivid picture—brooding, mysterious, poetic—revealing an alien and ancient culture in the heart of modern New York. And the Bessarabians themselves, highly emotional both in tragedy and joy, come vibrantly to life.

Further comments—about the author—after you have finished an unusual experience in contemporary reading . . .

LILITH, STAY AWAY FROM THE DOOR

by B. J. R. STOLPER

AFTER TWO OR THREE DAYS SOMEONE notified the police. At once a tall policeman appeared, in a blue uniform, with enormous shoulders, with a pair of cold eyes that saw nothing.

The policeman—his name was Brannigan—saw nothing but a tenement crowded with Jews stubborn as mules. He paid no attention to the clusters of crudely printed rectangles pasted up wherever there was an entrance to a home. The little squares of print were in Hebrew. They made no sense to him. From landing to landing he climbed, knocking at doors, asking questions, growing more and more angry. The bearded men shook their heads, the silent women slammed their doors as soon as the policeman withdrew his big foot.

Tightening his lips, Brannigan got out the key he had been given, opened the door of young Háyyim's living room, and tramped into the

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deserted flat. He looked at the furniture. He looked at Háyyim's clothes and underwear lying neatly folded on a chair, and began writing down an orderly statement in his little book.

When he was through he crossed the dark hallway to the three rooms where Háyyim's old parents lived. Háyyim's mother was tottering about in the dim kitchen in front of the cheap curtain that shut off the two inner rooms. She had a beaten look, and her mouth trembled as she moved from stove to table and back again. The stove was cold and covered, like the table, with clean newspaper from which she kept brushing imaginary crumbs. When the policeman opened the door she turned instantly, with such agony in her eyes that Brannigan grew uncomfortable. She seized his big hand before he could snatch it away, kissing and kissing it as if she would never let it go.

"I'm sorry, old lady," he said gruffly. "I only come to find out a thing or two, but they won't tell me nothing."

"Sor-ree," she repeated. She had not understood a syllable, but the policeman's tone had taken her strength away again.

"Leah," called a deep voice from the inner room.

"Who's in there?" demanded Brannigan.

Without waiting for an answer he lifted the curtain and stared in. An old man crouched there on the bare planks, slipperless, in the attitude of a mourner. His head was bent, his needle-scarred fingers still fumbled at the gash in his vest that he had made when the full news broke upon him. He had torn his garment for the dead.

"Is that his father?"

"Fóter, yoh," she answered with a sob. "What wouldst thou, Zádoc?"

"Speak not too much. What would it profit even if he understood thee?"

"My son, my son," she whimpered.

"May he reach his place in peace," answered the old man without raising his voice.

His wife's wrinkled face quivered as if he had struck her. Tears were trickling over her cheeks as she sat down on the floor near her husband, shuddering and trembling.

"In peace," she prayed brokenly. "May he come to his place in peace, O God."

Brannigan twisted his cap in his hands. He had taken it off some time ago. Poor old geezers. There it was, if he could only get at it.

Yet had he understood Zádoc's few dreary sentences he would have been more perplexed still. Hell, he thought; routine, and beginning to be a headache. Man disappeared on his wedding day. Find out what you can. Turn in a photograph.

He looked around at the walls. Maybe this was it. Looked like a picture covered with a bedsheet.

He lifted a corner of the sheet.

Well, whaddaya know! A cracked looking glass.

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And nothing else. Bare walls, bare mantelpiece. A couple of copper pots, four brass candlesticks, and a brass percolator thing with a spigot and a sort of chimney on top.

As the policeman walked irresolutely back to the kitchen, there was a timid knock at the door. A dark-faced schoolboy stood hesitating on the threshold, an unwrapped loaf of black bread hugged under his arm. In two strides the policeman had reached him and marched him into the room.

"In here," he said grimly, shutting the door. "Now give. You're the first kid I've seen around here. Whaddaya doing here?"

"I done—I did an errand for her. Bread."

"Where's all the other kids? There ought to be a hundred of them."

The boy hesitated.

"They are in school," he said finally.

"What about *you?*"

"I am on afternoon session; I don't go in the morning."

"I'll bet you don't. Then where's the other kids, the small ones?"

The boy shook his head.

"Yósheleh . . ."

Háyyim's mother had lifted the curtain and was straining helplessly toward the uncomprehended words.

"What did she say?" demanded Brannigan.

"She only called my name in Jewish. Can I give her the bread?"

The policeman took the loaf and put it into the old woman's hands.

"Now, old lady," he said. "You can stay, but not a peep." He had raised his voice, as if he could make her understand through loudness.

From the inner room there arose a low chant, indescribably sad.

"What's the old fella doing?"

"He is saying tîllim," answered the boy.

"And what's that?"

"I don't know. It ain't—it is not prayers; it is in the Bible, I guess. He is sitting shîva."

"What's that? Shiver? What's making him shiver?"

"It's a Jewish word," explained the boy. "It means when someone dies, you sit on the floor for him, and that's shîva."

"And he's shivering for Háyyim, is that it?"

"Háyyim?" wondered the boy.

"Sure. Háyyim. That's his son's name, ain't it?"

"No, sir," said the boy reluctantly. "His son's name was Isróel." He looked up swiftly at the policeman, spat furtively to one side, and slipped his fingers under his shirt to touch the fringed amulet hanging there.

"How about it?" demanded the policeman. "Went under another name, did he?"

Yósheleh spoke rapidly in Yiddish to the old woman and listened to her replies with puckered forehead. At last he turned a bewildered face toward Brannigan.

"She says his name was Isróel. Only when he died—only he did

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not die—they changed his name so he would not die. They changed his name to Háyyim."

"That's a new one. Say that again."

"So he would not die. They changed his name to Háyyim."

"And how would that help?"

The boy moved uneasily.

"*Háyyim,* it is such a word. It also means *life.*"

"Háyyim, Háyyim," repeated the old woman mournfully.

Brannigan moistened his pencil.

"And he died, after all?"

Yósheleh stole a glance at the old woman and began picking at a frayed cuff.

"I guess so," he whispered at last.

"Believed dead," wrote Brannigan. "And when was he first missing?"

Yósheleh hung his head. "Monday," he said sullenly.

"What kind of a guy was he? A tough guy? Was he always looking for trouble?"

"No, sir. He was going to be a rabbi."

Háyyim's mother had caught at the familiar sound. She threw her apron over her face and began beating her breasts with a sort of dreadful rhythm, weeping in a voice that went through bone and marrow. Then she grew quiet; only her body rocked imperceptibly as she wiped her eyes.

"Look here, kid," said Brannigan. "Ask her if she knew anybody who had it in for him."

Yósheleh remained dumb.

"You gonna do what I ask?"

"No, sir."

"You ain't?" said the policeman ominously. "You want me to pull you in?"

"I did not do nothing."

"You know who done it?"

"No, sir! No, sir!"

"The tenants in this tenement house know *something,*" said the policeman harshly.

The boy began to cry.

"Who do *they* say done it? Who do *they* say done it?"

Over and over he plied the shrinking boy with the same words, with increasing intensity, till the answer burst unwillingly from the boy's lips.

"Devils! Everybody knows devils carried him away!"

The big Celt felt his own hair bristle on his scalp.

"Damned if you don't seem to believe it! One more question, kid, and then you can beat it. Did this dead guy have a girl friend?"

"In back of the bakery," whimpered Yósheleh. "Downstairs. Please, can I go now?"

The policeman nodded.

"Yósheleh—" implored the old woman.

But the boy rushed out of the room without another word.

She was still pleading as Brannigan went out. The low chant from the inner room, rising and falling, still sounded in his ears after he had stepped out into the dark hallway. His own heavy tread creaked on

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the stairs. Otherwise there was breathless silence throughout the tenement—no doors ajar, no jabbering on the landings, no kids on the banisters, no kids anywhere. An oppressive atmosphere of listening-behind-doors brooded over the house.

The bakery was an ordinary store—no different from fifty others in that part of the city—with Hebrew lettering on the plate-glass window and foreign-looking twists of bread heaped up on display.

Brannigan walked in. He rapped on the counter, called out, and was about to make his way toward the rear when a thin little man came in from the street and stood silently waiting, holding open the door. A moment later a second man came in, anonymous behind a stack of heavily loaded metal trays which his powerful hands set down on the counter, noiseless as a feather. He growled something and motioned toward the back of the store. The little man shook his head and the other shambled out again, shutting the door. A goon, the big one, but a pair of shoulders on him. Both men wore dirty undershirts and stained trousers, and were gray with flour from their skullcaps to their cracked shoes. The baker and one of his helpers.

"Talk English?"

"Yiddish," answered the baker indifferently.

"That's a help. I wanna talk to Háyyim's girl—Isróel's girl-friend."

"My daughter. Sick."

Brannigan looked him up and down. Behind the stolid manner he saw the same sullenness that he had been meeting all morning. The policeman's voice was beginning to take on an edge when a door burst open at the rear of the bakery and a young woman hurried in. Her eyes were restless, her face very pale.

"You Háyyim's girl?"

"Yes. To be married." She bent her head.

"I want to ask you a few questions," he said gruffly.

"You find—somet'ing?" she asked in a low voice. "I hope always—" She began to tremble. "An accident, even?"

"Take it easy, and we'll find out."

Good-looking. Didn't get that face from little short-and-dirty over there. Or from that fat woman—when did *she* blow in? Must be the baker's wife, and she was just as frightened as the rest of them.

The girl sank onto a chair and began twisting her fingers as Brannigan opened his little notebook.

"Did you have a quarrel with him?"

"Never."

"Did he have any business troubles?"

A sort of hysterical laugh burst from her.

"A garment worker, business troubles!"

"Zelda," muttered her father.

"A garment worker," she repeated with irony. "Is a strike, yes, but we got—enough." The words seemed

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wrung from her, with painful pauses. "*I* work, *he* work. Garments. And my fóter put more for us to begin. T'ousand dollars he put for us both in the bank."

The baker mumbled something.

"Did he have any enemies?"

"Not one. Nobody."

"A thousand dollars, that's a lot of money."

She looked up listlessly.

"A rabbi he would be," she said, as if that explained everything.

"About that money. Could he take it out of the bank if he wanted to?"

"He would not do that," she replied wearily.

"He might. Did you go to the bank and check?"

A flush spread over her pale face.

"My fóter went," she said in a tortured voice. "The money still lays. I wish *not!*" she cried. "I wish he is a t'ief, a liar—" She covered her face with her hands.

The heavy woman rushed forward and drew the girl to her ample body, patting her cheek and shoulder and smoothing her hair with clumsy tenderness. Then she released her and walked determinedly over to the policeman.

Despite her shapeless figure there was a certain dignity about her gesture as she beckoned Brannigan to follow her down the length of the store. Lifting her arm, she pointed through the plate-glass window to the wrought-iron railing which defined the approach to the bakery. She had the resolute air of one who is about to tell the whole story, come what may.

"A kîtzour—" she began, and plunged at once into a torrent of dramatic Yiddish, flashing her eyes, waving her hands, and pointing, pointing, now to herself, now back to her daughter, then toward her husband, toward the ceiling, and finally, with a manner of dreadful intensity, out toward the iron railing again.

The policeman listened hard, but all he could understand was that the girl was getting it all, and not liking any of it.

"Must not be true," she kept repeating. "Impossible. Impossible."

"All right, impossible. But give me a hint. What's impossible? What *about* that railing? What was your mother telling me?"

But the girl just stared at him with despair in her eyes.

"Okay. Okay for now. Just one thing. We gotta send out descriptions, and so on. Can you let me have this, now, Háyyim's photograph?"

"Photográph?"

A look of even greater terror came into her face, into all three of their faces. Their features took on that obstinate set that Brannigan was beginning to know only too well. Not only would they give him no photo, from now on they wouldn't give out with anything. He put away his notebook. He was no Sam Spade. The sergeant would have to take it from here.

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The sergeant listened with an impatient expression.

"Hops," he said briefly. "You're full of them."

Brannigan had been unable to keep the fantastic out of his narrative.

"And they wouldn't give you a photo?"

"I couldn't get one."

"You should of stood in bed. Wait a minute, here's the captain. Captain, would you look over this report? It's that disappearance case on West 114th Street, possible homicide."

The captain's bushy eyebrows rose as he glanced down the sheet.

"What's all this? You been seeing Dracula? Okay, turn it over to Friedman. Why didn't you put Friedman on it in the first place?"

"He was busy. We were using him on the Jewish angle in that package-to-Europe racket."

"Put him on this. It shouldn't take him too long."

That was the year the Department had begun the cautious use of a new *modus operandi*. One of the high brass had read *Kim* to some purpose, and Friedman was the experimental result—a blend of Hurree Babu and Mahbub Ali, only not quite so spectacular, of course. Friedman was an unobtrusive, bearded little man who could slip into his peculiar environment without a ripple. He spoke every Yiddish dialect except Ladino, and he looked the part because he had been brought up in it. An odd, restricted part of him was pure flatfoot; the rest, exactly what he seemed.

When Friedman plodded in some time later, the sergeant briefed him and pushed over Brannigan's little black book. Friedman read it very carefully, nodded, and went out again. Late that same evening he plodded in once more, and silently laid a scorched photograph on the sergeant's desk.

The picture showed a young man of perhaps nineteen, with long pious earlocks, and that delicate fuzz of beard which has never known a razor. The posture was stiff, but the two dancing eyes which laughed up from under the formal skullcap were at considerable variance with the rest of the photograph.

"This him?"

Friedman nodded.

"Find out much?"

"Some. Offhand," said Friedman moodily, "it looks as if he ran off naked. Every stitch he owned was in his room, including his socks and underwear. Last week he bought an outfit for his wedding. That's all there, too. New coat on the back of a chair, new shoes and socks on the floor, all waiting. Though that ain't to say he might not have other clothes nobody knows about."

"Could be," said the sergeant.

"Maybe. None of it makes any sense."

"Maybe there was another girl friend?"

"I don't think so."

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Friedman went into more details. He had found his gathering of information no easy matter even with his special aptitude. Most of that block was populated by Puerto Ricans. Only four of the tenements were rented to Jews, Bessarabian Jews, alien even to those other aliens. And the Bessarabians had been unusually difficult. He had tried the baker's wife again but now she wouldn't talk, either. And the daughter just sat and twisted her hands. At last Friedman had walked over to the Bessarabian synagogue three blocks north, on the Avenue. It was about the right hour for what he wanted, and the nervous gossip around the long, candle-lighted table, in the intervals between Talmudic droning, had given him his line of approach. The missing man was dead. He would never be seen again. That was the general belief.

Friedman had dug up the photograph in the parents' home. He had found it in the kitchen stove on a pile of charrings. To Brannigan the common signs had been dumb, but to Friedman the cold kitchen stove —covered on a weekday with clean newspaper—had spoken aloud. The old woman had shrunk from using the fire. Why? Because it was the fire in which, so to speak, she had burned her son. For three days she and old Zádoc had lived on black bread and herring rather than do the unspeakable thing—"burn their son."

The sergeant said he could see that. But why burn the photo in the first place? Didn't they realize it might help?

Friedman shook his head.

"The girl wanted to help. But when Brannigan asked her for a photo she threw an extra fit. She had a photo, all right. She had his picture hidden, and all three of them were scared as hell. They believe things, that's why. They believe new ghosts stick around. That's why they hang sheets over the mirrors—liable to show queer things that ain't there. They hide the dead man's pictures or turn them to the wall. In this case—and I never ran into anything like this before—I can see where they'd want to burn every photo they could lay their hands on. They wouldn't want to take any chances."

He pressed his lips together.

"You think it was murder?" asked the sergeant.

"I don't know. A *kind* of murder. And I'm not sure of that, either."

His tone was so odd that the sergeant looked at him speculatively. Friedman's expression was brooding, almost resentful.

"I'm in the wrong business," said Friedman moodily. "Maybe you better get somebody else—somebody who's all cop all the time. I thought I was finished with all that and here I get jerked back into things you'd think . . . These old men from the Old Country . . . I can't shake off the feeling that I'm dreaming this one."

The sergeant picked up the photo-

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graph again. He was only half listening, being hardened to murders and disappearances in his congested district. But as Friedman's monotonous voice went on, the sergeant was startled into complete attention, staring at the delicate, Semitic face in the photograph with something like shock.

"Here," he growled. "What's this you're giving me!"

"They all say he's a goner," repeated Friedman, "and maybe he is. But if his body don't turn up soon, we'll have bigger trouble. The Bessarabians are almost out of their minds. Take a look at this." He put a small sheet of crude printing on the sergeant's desk. "They've gone in for them wholesale," Friedman said, and laughed without mirth.

"What is it, anyway? Hell, it's in Yiddish."

"Hebrew," said Friedman mechanically. "They paste it up on the door of a room where a woman is having a baby." He pointed his finger. "Take a look at this drawing. It don't mean much to you, and maybe not to me, but it means a lot to *them*. This oblong here is a house, any house. These eight words are the eight fathers and mothers watching inside the 'house' to protect the baby: Adam and Eve, Abraham and Sarah, and so on. These three words down here, they're extra help, big magic to keep devils from getting at the baby. 'Sîni, S'nsîni, Samn'glîouf.'"

"Get to the point."

"I'm getting there," said Friedman grimly. "I'm just sketching in the background. The rest of it is psalms and charms, except this bit here—here where the 'door' of the 'house' is supposed to be." He tapped with his forefinger. "That's the payoff. I'll translate it for you: 'Lilith and her anger, utterly out!' Yes. Lilith is to stay away from the door, and this sticker is to *keep* her out. They used to paste one on the door of a room where a woman was having a baby. Now they've got every door in sight plastered with these stickers! To keep out Lilith. And who is Lilith? Adam's first wife. His real wife. She fooled around with the snake. She had kids by the devil, and Adam got rid of her. She's the mother of everything wicked you ever heard of, jealous as hell, and prowling around for the chance to strangle every male baby that's trying to get born. Now the Bessarabians think she got Háyyim. Lilith got him, you understand. She's on the warpath, they can't make out why, and now she can take them at *any* age, and they're frantic. They sent all their kids out of the block. You won't find a single kid now in any one of those four tenement houses." His voice went up in pitch. "And where could they send them? To *other* Bessarabians, somewhere else in the city! More and more kids jammed together in one district, and pretty soon . . ."

"Okay, okay!" The sergeant had

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himself in hand. "So find his body. So turn up some facts—not a lot of baloney and superstition!"

Baloney and superstition. With an effort of will Friedman put from his mind the ancient formula for protection against jeopardy.

Facts. But which were the facts and which something else? The two hours Friedman had spent in the Bessarabian synagogue, just before his report to the sergeant, had been unforgettable. Almost from the first, a vague something in the atmosphere of that plain house of worship had stolen on his consciousness. At that hour, in such a place, he could always expect to find a noisy company of enthusiasts weaving their thumbs ecstatically with the tangled skein of rabbinic disputation. Instead, he had been struck by the silence, the air of tension.

The very place itself, so familiar in its arrangements, had begun, almost at once, to induce a state of mind: the rows of empty benches marching like stiff waves through the long darkness; the ceiling stirring with shadows; the Ark looming against the east wall behind its velvet curtain, its two lions in tarnished silver; the motionless red lamp hanging in midair; the mourner's wick floating in its glass of grease on a distant shelf. Suddenly a thin drone of voices had risen from the scholars' table in the corner; and Friedman's thin film of sophistication had slid away. For an instant he had reacted to the old, uneasy, credulous tingle; he was a frightened boy again, shrinking against his father's sleeve, while stiff pages rustled and a low monotonous voice, speaking apparently from nowhere, kept calling up terrifying Eastern shadows before the composite imagination of the room.

Friedman moved away to the east wall where he remained by himself and murmured the belated afternoon prayer. Then he walked over to the little group of men seated in the corner.

The great leather-bound tomes lay open. The old precentor, in his place at the middle of the table, sat combing his white beard with his fingers. The ancient man now took a final puff at his yellow cigarette, thriftily pinched out the glow, and laid the butt aside. In the ensuing silence he read a last phrase aloud with some deliberation, then closed the book.

"Grow strong," he said.

"Grow strong," murmured the others after him. "Grow strong and we grow strong."

Thereupon each man shut his own volume and reached at once for another. The old precentor intoned the prescribed blessing and opened to the first page of the new volume under his hand. And the drone of study began again.

Friedman blinked. He had just witnessed the impossible. It was not so much what the men had done as what they had *not* done. Only a catastrophe of racial magnitude could,

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at this moment, be keeping them thus subdued, could make them go on without a pause, with no more to mark the completion of their studies than the relighting of a cigarette.

For Friedman knew their peculiar scale of realities, their compromise with life inside their timeless wall: where their studies engrossed them in such a fury of concentration that, when they emerged from the deep pool of a tractate, they threw off all restraint. They plunged at once into the headlong release that they called a séoum, a fantastic celebration of wild drinking, singing, and dancing before the Lord. He had never known an exception. Their very casualness in this instance held something fatal and extraordinary.

An hour later Friedman sat listening to the old precentor with a sense of growing insecurity, the hopelessness in the old man's intelligent, analytic eyes increasing his own uneasiness to the point of actual fear.

"We are too frightened," said the old precentor simply. "We are too full of fear to get drunk and to dance in a séoum, and our hope is in the Lord which made heaven and earth, and there is nothing we can do. She will take our children. She may even take us all, and there is nothing we can do. It used to be our newly born that we were afraid for. Now She is beginning to take our young men. She has taken him. You will never find him."

"You believe that?"

"You will never find him, him you will never find. For what can policemen do, what can mortal men do? How many leagues, how many seas and mountain ranges, separate us from Bessarabia, yea, from Jerusalem? Yet neither time, nor distance, nor the strength of crowded cities availeth against that which is young forever, which flies like the pestilence, and destroys, God forbid, like God. In the name of God, then."

Friedman's fingers played with the little police shield in his shabby pocket. Detective second grade. His fingers smoothed the cool metal, turned it, felt the embossing, turned it again.

"Even so," he said. "Nevertheless. Fear casts out reason. Is it not possible to analyze, argue, and consider alternatives, as in any other difficult problem? I am, as you say, a policeman. I am greatly troubled about a panic spreading through this neighborhood. You can understand that. Suppose, just suppose that this fantastic danger has no basis in fact? That what you have here is only a simple disappearance, or even a murder, and that the rest is only a state of mind? If the police take care of the facts, then might not you . . . might not a day of uniting, of general prayer, even the use of amulets—"

The old man kept his eyes down. He went on as if there had been no interruption.

"Perhaps if we had believed the poor boy earlier. But what difference

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would that have made? He might have given up any thought of marriage and it would have come to the same in the end. No wife, no son to say the mourner's prayer after he was gone; no hope in this world, no hope in the life to come; and the rest of us—fruit in her orchard, Háyyim. He put two coins in his pocket . . ."

Friedman sat very still.

"He put two coins in his pocket—only two. It was the eve of a holy day. He would ride down one way in the subway—that is permitted; he would then have to walk the long distance back—after sundown that is not permitted. He was going far downtown to the great synagogue—the greater synagogue—at the edge of the island, I think, on Scammel Street, close to the bridge. A year ago, Monday. The next morning he walked in here with his fantastic story, and by the time the sun went down, every child in the neighborhood was laughing at the young hássid who had been too faithful with the strong drink on the one night in the year when drunkenness is a merit. Yes. His fantastic story.

"It was late—the night was advanced when he left the shadow of the bridge and began his long walk back uptown, from river to river, the length of the island. He said the moon was swinging from side to side, like a pendulum, and that all things seemed especially bright and sharp to his eyes, that his eyes seemed especially piercing. He could recall every detail of the evening—from the moment he had hurried in to the celebration to the moment he had turned his back on Scammel Street and begun the long walk home. He had leaped in the procession; he had carried the scroll in his arms. He had danced in the streets, he had basked in the fervor with other excited hassîdim, reeling with liquor. He had gaped at the women—there were swarms of them—and he had smelled the fragrance of wild wood flowers. After a while he had smelled the fragrance wherever he happened to be; and after a time he saw the woman, the women, who spread the fragrance. There were two of them. One he could not seem to remember; but he remembered the other very distinctly. She was slender, and she wore a deep green veil that flowed and fluttered, and she always seemed to be moving where he was moving, and looking, looking at him, turning her head toward him. Then she presesd against him and her body was yielding and smelled like wild wood flowers. Then she was gone, and he could not find her again. After a while he began to think it was time he went home.

"The streets were empty. He walked past miles of dark houses, westward to the Bowery, northward to Fourth Street, westward to Fifth Avenue, and ever northward, as he had been given directions. Then the dark mass of Central Park appeared,

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and he was walking the endless, wide, empty roadway, with a stone wall and dark trees at his left, and dark trees arching overhead. All this while he had been alone on the streets, not a cat prowling.

"Then he saw the two women walking toward him out of a side path; again he smelled the fragrance of wild wood flowers, and he began to be afraid, he did not know why.

"The slender one said: 'The hour is late, young man.'

" 'The hour is late,' he repeated.

" 'You remember me?'

" 'I remember.'

" 'You have not forgotten?'

" 'I have not forgotten.'

" 'Embrace the bride, kiss me, kiss me.'

"And his two eyes closed, and he arched back his throat, and he felt a kiss that was a pang, a biting, a piercing and stabbing and sucking, and he fainted away. And in his fainting it seemed to him that she grew taller and taller till her eyes looked down at him from the tops of the trees. Her eyes were green. Then an angry policeman was beating the soles of his shoes and he saw that he was in the park itself. He was lying on grass, behind bushes, and the sun was shining. He got up quickly and hurried away.

"His garments were in disorder; there were green grass stains on his trousers, and stains on his coat—a new coat gray in color. He took the coat off to look at it while he was walking home, and he grew even more frightened. The stains were not stains at all: they were burns—scorched places in the cloth itself, down the front where she had pressed her body, and on both shoulders where she had rested her arms.

"He walked in here the same morning and told us that he had seen Lilith, that She had kissed him and embraced him; and by sundown every child in the neighborhood was laughing at him. It was not long before he was laughing at himself. Who knows how wool gets scorched? There had been candles, Armenian pushcarts, gasoline flares. Wine is a mocker, strong drink clouds the memory. Háyyim put away the ruined coat and forgot he ever had it. After a while hardly anyone asked him any more if he had kissed his 'bride' again. He was busy nine hours a day somewhere, doing something with a needle. He was going to be a rabbi, and meanwhile he had been saving up—for a year, two years—who knows how long it takes in this country? And every night he was here at this table, reading and studying.

"So, of course, a young man like that. This man and that, with daughters, began to consider him. Shábseh—Shábseh is the baker. He lived in the same building and he went upstairs and talked to old Zádoc, Háyyim's father, and they came to an agreement. There had been some earlier talk about some-

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one else; I forget—another baker, I think, but it had come to nothing. Shábseh put a thousand dollars in the bank, and his Zelda was written in to be married.

"Then she began to have little sicknesses, and the wedding was put off from one time to another, till Háyyim said there would be no more puttings off, even if the bride had to sit in a chair under the canopy. He had begun to feel great love for her, for she was beautiful.

"The night before the wedding, Zelda got up from her bed, in the middle of the night, and wakened her father. Her mother tried to get her to go back to sleep, but Zelda kept shaking her father and telling him to arise. He must wake up at once and hurry upstairs to the third floor. There was something wrong. Something had happened to Háyyim. She began to weep. She ran back and began putting on her own clothes. So Shábseh went. He went through the dark bakery and unlocked the street door—he was still heavy with sleepiness. Someone had left a dirty rag hanging on the iron railing outside. There still were sounds in the cellar under the bakery—the oven door closing; his helper must be about done with tomorrow's rolls and bread.

"Shábseh says he began to be angry. He was angry when he reached the dark third-floor landing, but he went over to Háyyim's door and listened. Then he opened the door even though everything was quiet. He turned on a light and felt like a fool. There was a pillow on the couch but it had not been slept on. Háyyim's clothes were on a chair by the couch, and his wedding clothes on a chair by the window.

"Now Shábseh *knew* he had been a fool. Háyyim must have gone over to his mother across the hall. He must be sleeping in his old bed. Just the same, Shábseh went across the hall and knocked on Zádoc's door. Both old people came out, very frightened, and walked back with him to look again. They had not seen their son since early in the evening when he had eaten supper with them. Háyyim's mother began to cry and say they must go to the police. She and Zádoc got dressed, and Shábseh went downstairs with them to talk it over first with Zelda. Shábseh felt very bad that he had been angry in this unhappiness, and he became angry again on the street. The cellar was padlocked, and his helper had gone home and taken the key with him instead of leaving it in the usual place. The dirty rag was still hanging on the iron railing—a dirty rag untidy in the dark.

"Then Háyyim's mother was screaming—screaming so that windows began to open in all the houses and lights began to go on. Zelda came running out of the bakery, and stopped in the door like a stone. She began screaming, too.

"Then the street in front of the bakery was full of people, and everybody saw that the dirty rag hanging

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on the iron railing was Háyyim's gray coat, and that a piece of green veil was lying on it. Our own people ran in a panic to their children . . ."

"What happened to the coat?" said Friedman.

The old man looked at him.

"Zelda pushed it into the stove and poured kerosene over it—over the coat and the green veil. Old Zádoc and his wife went back to their three rooms and sat down on the floor to sit shîva. What would be the purpose of waiting?"

Friedman stared down at his feet as he walked toward the subway on his way downtown to the morgue. There was always the chance.

He rode back uptown still turning over possibilities in his mind. There was something in the back of his memory that might make a difference if only he could pin it down. Something obvious, like why does a chicken cross the street. He ate some supper, but he could not have told you afterward what Max, the waiter in the restaurant, had put in front of him. He went to bed and spent a restless night. The next morning he went over to the garment factory where Háyyim had worked; after that, to the union local. But by then he was only going through the motions. For in his own heart he knew that the answer lay in quite a different direction.

Somewhere during his night of sleepless tossing that tantalizing bit of information, that impression or suspicion, peeped up suddenly from his memory.

It could be. It could be the answer to the whole mess. It was not a nice answer, but it would be a lot less frightening to the Bessarabians —and to him.

He took out his gun and checked it carefully. He would use his gun if he had to. If his guess was wrong, Lord knows it would be bad. But it better not be wrong, because that left only an utterly terrifying nonhuman agency of destruction as an alternative. No. And he would have to be careful not to kill, no matter how much of a going-over he himself had to take. The man had to live long enough to talk—so that the Bessarabians could get the benefit.

A little less than an hour later Friedman limped into the precinct station, hauling the baker's big helper with him—the one who had been so anonymous behind his stack of metal trays. The two men, the big one and little Friedman, were handcuffed together. Friedman had his gun out, and the whole side of his bearded face was a raw, blood-clotted mess. His surly prisoner towered over him but looked as if he had taken a beating, too.

"That disappearance case," mumbled Friedman. "The young fella was murdered. Here's the murderer."

The gigantic, flour-covered figure lunged suddenly, dragging Friedman with him. His free hand grabbed Friedman by the throat as the big

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man began to yell unintelligible threats. It took the sergeant, rushing from behind his desk, and as many policemen as were there to subdue the raving prisoner and put him into a cell.

"He doesn't like us," said the sergeant. "Well, around here who does? But does that make him a murderer?"

"He's a murderer, all right. He admitted it," said Friedman, gingerly touching his face. "He told me down in the cellar under the bakery, while he was beating my brains out and I was trying to beat his brains out. He went upstairs after everybody was asleep and choked Háyyim to death. He carried him down the three flights of stairs and put his body in the live firebox under the big oven. He boasted of it—kept pointing to the long iron slice-bar and laughing his head off."

"But why? Why did he do it?"

"He liked the girl, and now Háyyim was going to get her. By killing Háyyim he fixed it so he still had a chance."

"You mean to tell me he took the kid's clothes off afterward and folded them—and all that other crazy stuff?"

Friedman's face darkened. "He got the poor devil's coat—remember the gray coat?—and hung it on the railing for someone to find. Had it all figured out. That way he'd be safe and maybe later marry the girl. There *had* been some talk of it till Háyyim came into the picture, and that ate into him. Went wild, all right, but he knew all the angles. That malarkey about Lilith. Every Bessarabian—"

"You were talking like a Bessarabian yourself," said the sergeant, "for a while. What made you change your mind?"

"Part of me didn't like it," said Friedman. "What threw me off, the only possible suspect never seemed to show at all. There had been some talk about the girl and someone else—some baker, you remember—but that faded out. And then—you know how it is. I began to look for something simple that looks hard—like when is a door not a door. And then it came to me that a door *was* a door even when it was ajar. It was simply an *open* door. And a baker's helper—well, call him a baker and you have the suspect you've been looking for. So I checked back. Yes, it was the baker's helper who had been turned down. He was a surly brute and that might be a motive. He had the size and the beef to do the killing quietly. He knew the story about Lilith and Háyyim in Central Park. He was down in the cellar on the right night, and could work the gray coat business with no trouble at all. So I went after him. The firebox seemed a good bet."

"Nice going, Friedman. Lucky he's a psycho and spilled his guts, or you'd have trouble making it stick. We may, anyway."

"He'll talk," said Friedman. "He wants them all to know how much

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smarter he is, even if he isn't educated in Aramaic and studying to be a rabbi, like poor Háyyim. That's what he was screaming when he came at the lot of us."

Friedman turned and began limping toward the street door.

"Hey, ain't you gonna wash up? You're a mess," said the sergeant.

"Where are you going, anyway? You gotta book him—or don't you care any more?"

"Well," said Friedman. "I thought I'd look in on old Zádoc and his wife and see what I can do. And maybe the girl, later. She's taken quite a beating."

He walked back to the lockers.

Would you believe that the story you have just read—brimming with vitality and freshness—was written by a man who is over 70 years old? Yes, it is true. The author is a septuagenarian—he admits it proudly, and he has good reason to be proud; for Mr. Stolper has led a full and richly rewarding life. And here he is, in his vigorous 70s, winning the Special Award of Merit from young, eager competitors!

Mr. Stolper grew up, he tells us, in the New York of horse-cars, new brownstones, and already-old tenements. A former schoolteacher, he has (in his own words) "taught about everything and all ages, from the kindergarten through the college level, in New York, New Jersey, and Oklahoma . . . including about 25 years at the experimetnal school, Teachers College, Columbia University."

In his earlier days he worked his way west (good Lord, he couldn't have known Horace Greeley!) doing some of those things that are worth more than their weight in gold dust to the eventual writer—horse herding, short-order dish washing, attendant in a mental asylum, paving the street that now leads to the Toledo Library, burning 3-year asparagus roots (whatever that may mean, and surely there must be a story in it?), laying railroad ties in Flagstaff . . . but all that was some time ago, Mr. Stolper reminds us. Today, retired, he is perhaps busier than ever: for example, he has quite a stockpile of children's books, written and illustrated by himself; "everybody likes them, nobody prints them—too expensive to do, they say, because of the colors."

Retired? In his 70s? Mr. Stolper can give many of us cards and spades!

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EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR: **ROBERT BLOCH**

TITLE: ***Crime in Rhyme***

TYPE: Detective Story

LOCALE: England

TIME: The Present

COMMENTS: *A whimsical murder mystery? We didn't think it was really possible. Well, here's Mr. Bloch proving us wrong. Meet an extraordinary blend of the White Rabbit and a tough private eye . . .*

MISS KENT APPROACHED THE cottage door and rapped sharply. It was really a darling place, she decided; for some reason it reminded her of the home of the White Rabbit in *Alice in Wonderland*.

When the door opened to reveal the occupant of the cottage, Miss Kent could not restrain a gasp. Aside from the length of his ears, the man standing before her might have passed for the White Rabbit himself. He was small, pale, pink-eyed, and his face ran largely to nose; his mouth was wobbly and his chin almost negligible. Also he was wearing a checkered weskit, and even as Miss Kent gazed at him he consulted his watch.

"I'm looking for Rickie Lane," she announced.

The man blinked at her and smiled. "Won't you come in, please?"

Miss Kent entered and found herself in a paneled hallway with mid-Victorian furnishings which heightened the resemblance to the world of Lewis Carroll and Tenniel illustrations.

"I am Archibald Pope," the little man said. "You must be Miss Kent, the lady who wrote about the secretarial position."

"That is correct," she admitted. "Is Mr. Lane at home?"

The little man nodded. "If you'll be good enough to step in here—"

He waved her through a door-

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way and into a large parlor equipped as an office. Filing cabinets lined the walls, and the center of the room was dominated by a large desk on which stood an electric typewriter and a fluorescent lamp.

Little Mr. Pope walked over to the desk and sank into the chair behind it.

"Now, then," he said. "If I might have a look at your references, please?"

Miss Kent hesitated. "But I understand it was Mr. Lane who needed a secretary."

"So he does." The small man inclined his head. "I am Rickie Lane."

"But—"

Mr. Pope sighed. "You are disappointed because I choose to work under a pseudonym?" he asked. "Considering the somewhat —er—violent nature of my writing, it seems advisable."

Miss Kent flushed slightly. "It's not that," she confessed. "I hope you don't think me rude, Mr. Pope, but you just don't *look* like a writer."

Mr. Pope uttured a delighted chuckle and leaned back, running his hands through his white hair.

"Exactly, my dear lady!" he crowed. "I *don't* look like a writer, do I? Thanks to the photographs on the back of dust jackets, we all know what a writer looks like today. He is a scowling young Neanderthal with an unshaven chin that bristles nearly as much as his crew-cut. He wears a white T-shirt, and possibly a dog tag nestles against his hairy chest. That's your modern writer, eh?"

Miss Kent nodded. "If I remember correctly," she murmured, "there is just such a photograph on the back of all the Rickie Lane books."

"Indeed there is," Mr. Pope agreed. "Posed by a professional model—or, to be specific, a Greek gentleman my agent found washing dishes in a restaurant in Soho. Although completely illiterate, it happens that he resembles a writer. In some cases, his illiteracy would increase the resemblance. At any rate, I agreed to the deception in the interests of commerce."

"I understand," said Miss Kent.

"Perhaps you're disappointed?" Mr. Pope asked, softly. "I have had that trouble with secretaries before. They come to me with visions of working with a burly young brute, a hulking he-man who responds to the sight of a blonde the way Pavlov's dogs responded to the dinner bell. If you had any ideas along these lines, then perhaps you won't care to continue this interview."

Miss Kent shook her head. "On the contrary," she told him, "I'm greatly relieved." Fumbling in her purse, she drew out a sheaf of letters. "My references," she said.

"Thank you." Mr. Pope barely glanced at them before placing the

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correspondence on his desk. "I presume you are experienced in typing, filing, taking dictation and all the requirements my *Times* advertisement specified. But that's secondary. What I am interested in is this—if you didn't seek me out with the notion of taking a position under a virile creative man, then just what reason did you have for applying?"

"Because I am a Rickie Lane fan," Miss Kent told him, earnestly. "I've read all your books."

"Have you, indeed?" Mr. Pope glanced over at the bookshelf and smiled. "Read them all, eh? Then perhaps you'll be good enough to favor me with your opinion. What did you think of the first one?"

"Mr. Munn Takes a Gun?" said Miss Kent. "It hit the target, with me."

Mr. Pope smiled. "How about *Mr. Fyfe Takes a Knife?"*

"Ripping."

"And *Mr. Frazer Takes a Razor?"*

"Keen."

"Then there's *Mr. Flubb Takes a Club."*

"Smashing."

"And my latest, have you read that—*Mr. Saxe Takes an Axe?"*

"Sharp and cutting. Penetrates deeply into your characters. Opens them up and lets the reader see what's inside."

Mr. Pope sat back and beamed.

"I am delighted to see that you are so perceptive a critic," he told her. "You may consider yourself hired as of now, if you wish. What do you say to room and board and twenty pounds a week?"

"Why, that would be wonderful, Mr. Pope." Miss Kent hesitated slightly. "But I'd intended taking a room in the village—"

"Nonsense, my dear girl! You'll stay here, of course. Plenty of room, and I can assure you I'm an excellent cook. I fancy a diet of cold mutton is not altogether to your taste, and the village inn offers little else."

"Yes, but—"

Mr. Pope glanced down at himself and smiled wryly. "I assure you there's nothing to fear from me," he said. "And if it's the neighbors you're worried about, we have none for a half mile around. I gather from your references that you are alone in the world—hence, I see no possibility of any scandal. And since I often find it necessary to work at night, your presence here will offer added convenience to us both."

Miss Kent fluffed her blonde curls nervously. "Very well," she answered. "I accept your offer. When do we begin?"

"Immediately," said Mr. Pope, rubbing his hands together briskly. "My next manuscript is due at the publisher's in a fortnight."

"How thrilling!"

Mr. Pope sighed. "I can hardly agree, inasmuch as I have yet to write a single line."

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"What seems to be the problem? Can't you think of a plot?"

The little man shook his head. "I see you don't understand," he said. "To me a plot is relatively unimportant. You've read my work, and the stuff other writers turn out. What does the plot consist of? Rickie Lane is a private eye who writes in the first person singular—although not quite as singular as some others I could mention. He stumbles on the corpse of a beautiful woman, and since he is not a necrophile there is only one thing to do. He must solve the crime. During the course of the story he beats up various thugs and is in turn beaten up; he is approached by various voluptuous and full-breasted females and he approaches them in turn. Eventually he discovers that the most voluptuous female of all is the killer, and he shoots her in the end, or the navel, or the ensuing *mêlée*. The plot, you see, is secondary to the real problem."

"But I should think the real problem is finding the murderer."

"For the reader, yes. But not for the author. His problem, in writing the story, is to find the crime."

"I never thought of it that way before." Miss Kent nodded. "But it makes sense, doesn't it?"

"Of course it does. That's where I got the whole idea for my series. One day a phrase just happened to pop into my head—a common phrase which often passes unnoticed. *Poetic justice*. It was then that I began to think of crime in rhyme. My titles came about inevitably. But in each case the murder itself was the most important element."

"You had to plot perfect crimes?"

Mr. Pope shook his head. "*Im*perfect crimes," he said.

"I'm afraid I don't understand."

"There's no trick to plotting a perfect crime," he explained. "Scotland Yard tells us a murder is committed in real life once every twelve minutes. Further statistics reveal that a good half of these murders remain unsolved. *Ergo*, one unsolved murder every twenty-four minutes; sixty perfect crimes committed each and every day, or close to twenty-two thousand a year."

"You're quite an expert," Miss Kent beamed.

"I should be. After all, it's my business. And as an expert I assure you that the perfect crime is the least of my problems. It's trying to invent a crime that *looks* perfect but contains a basic flaw or error in commission—a flaw that Rickie Lane can discover and which leads to his solution of the killing."

"Now I'm beginning to see what you mean," Miss Kent said. "And that's what you're looking for now?"

"Desperately," Mr. Pope admitted.

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"I'm afraid such matters are a little out of my ken," the girl told him. "But perhaps if we were to talk about it—"

Mr. Pope rose. "Later," he said. "But I see I have been a poor host. Let me get your valise from the hall and show you to your room. Undoubtedly you would like to freshen up a bit after your trip. That train from London is abominable."

He led her upstairs and into a quite comfortable apartment. "The bath is at the end of the hall," he informed her, "just past my room and the storeroom. I'll leave you to your own devices for a time while I take a turn about the garden. The sunset may provide inspiration."

He bowed and withdrew.

Miss Kent didn't bother to unpack. She waited until Mr. Pope had left the cottage and then sought out his room. For a time she was quite busy there, pausing in her efforts only to cock an ear for the sound of footsteps. Hearing nothing, she continued her activities, then transferred her attention to the storeroom.

It was necessary for her to force the lock, but this she did both expertly and effortlessly. Once inside, Miss Kent found herself amply repaid for her trouble—so much so, indeed, that she soon became completely engrossed. In fact, she forgot to listen—until it was too late.

She knew it was too late when she looked up and saw Mr. Pope standing in the doorway.

"Well, well," he observed mildly. "What have we here?"

Miss Kent faced him serenely. "What haven't we here?" she asked. She pointed to an array of objects unearthed from a small trunk in the corner. "A .38 Webley automatic—the same weapon you described in *Mr. Munn Takes a Gun*. A pearl-handled dagger with more than a suspicion of rust on the tip—just like the one mentioned in *Mr. Fyfe Takes a Knife*. And this straight-razor could not have got all these stains even if it had been legitimately used by a sufferer from chronic hemophilia. It reminds me of the murder weapon in *Mr. Frazer Takes a Razor*. Certainly there's no doubt about the blood on the end of this club—it is exactly as depicted in *Mr. Flubb Takes a Club*. As for the axe, it might be the former property of Miss Lizzie Borden, but I rather think it is the original specimen described in *Mr. Saxe Takes an Axe*."

Mr. Pope pursed his lips speculatively. "Quite right on all counts," he said. "I see there is little sense in any further attempts to conceal my methods. Like all true literary artists, I rely heavily on personal experience in my work. The autobiographical approach, you might say. I find it best to derive the bulk of my writing from life."

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"From death, you mean."

"As you will, dear lady." Mr. Pope shrugged. "Let us not quibble over details."

"Details? You've virtually admitted to committing five murders."

"Over a five-year period," Mr. Pope said, gently. "Allow me to refresh your memory as to the statistics. My contribution to them is slight—merely one out of nearly twenty-two thousand per annum. And in return, my contribution to the world of crime literature is great."

He took a step forward and his voice grew stronger. "The killer instinct is basic in us all," he told her. "Even a young lady like yourself gets a vicarious thrill from reading a gory mystery, and so do beardless youths and gentle clergymen and elderly dowagers. Yours is a harmless sublimation, but the urge is there—an urge strong enough to set you reading. But consider, if you will, how much stronger the urge must be to set a man *writing* this sort of thing."

"That's no justification," Miss Kent protested.

"I do not need justification," Mr. Pope replied. "My work speaks for itself. During the past half dozen years I have moved about the country under various names and disguises, and as a result of my endeavors five women have met an untimely end. But think, for a moment, of all the lives I must have saved! Think of the girls like yourself who found harmless outlets for your own homicidal tendencies in my books; think of the young men who used me as a surrogate for their own violent impulses, and the oldsters who refrained from killing their spouses and sought satisfaction through my work. Why, I must have averted hundreds of tragedies! That's the practical way to look at it. And from the purely critical standpoint you admitted that my work was—what did you say?—ripping, keen, smashing, eh?"

"Bloody awful," Miss Kent snapped, "if you must know the truth."

"Now, now," Mr. Pope chided. "Temper, dear child! Let us have none of that. You remind me of someone I once knew in Herts. When she—"

"The widow," Miss Kent interrupted. "The one they thought shot herself while looking through her husband's gun collection. You used that situation in your first book."

"So I did."

"And there was the girl in Rainham, and the woman in Manchester, and the chorus girl in Brighton—"

"Say no more," Mr. Pope murmured. "You have told me enough. Enough to realize that it was not idle curiosity which caused you to enter my storeroom, nor accident which brought you here. You, my

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dear lady, are nothing but a copper's nark."

Miss Kent drew herself up proudly. "I am nothing of the sort," she snapped. "I happen to be an employee of Scotland Yard."

"Then I take it I have been under suspicion for a considerable period?"

"That is correct, Mr. Pope, or whatever your name is. The variety of names and disguises you assumed threw us off for a time. Then somebody noted that within a year after the commission of each crime a new Rickie Lane mystery appeared. Similarity of weapons gave us the clue. We've had difficulty tracking you down, because your publishers work only through your agent, and he seems singularly elusive."

"I have no agent," said Mr. Pope. "He is as fictitious as the rest of my disguises." He paused. "Where are you going?"

Miss Kent edged towards the door. "I intend to ring up the Yard," she replied firmly.

"Can I not persuade you to change your mind? After all, think of the hundreds of slayings I've prevented—"

"I am thinking of the five you committed," she told him. "I warn you," she went on, as Mr. Pope inched forward, "you'd better not try to stop me. My superiors know I'm here."

"But nobody knows *I'm* here," he reminded her. "They'll come looking for a Mr. Pope. Needless to say, I shall be long gone."

"You can't get away with it. You ran that advertisement for a secretary—"

"As bait, to draw Scotland Yard out, in the event that they suspected. It means nothing." He strode quickly to the door and slammed it shut. "Now, then," he said.

"I shall scream!"

"But not for long." Mr. Pope stepped forward. There was a moment of brisk struggle, but the little man proved surprisingly strong. Within a few minutes Miss Kent lay on the floor, arms tied behind her and the useless screams dying in her throat.

"Hot work," Mr. Pope observed. "I had better get rid of this muck before I continue." Thoughtfully he removed the white wig, disclosing his head with its close crew-cut. Off came the spectacles, the putty nose, the built-up mouth, and the protruding teeth. In another moment he peeled off his weskit, sighing gratefully as he emerged from the garments to stand before her in a T-shirt. "That's better, eh?" he said. He flexed his muscles tentatively.

Miss Kent shuddered. "Why, you look just like the pictures on the dust jackets!" she exclaimed.

"True." He smiled down at her. "The Greek dishwasher in Soho is another invention of mine. I find the role excellent protective colora-

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tion. That is why, even if your police come seeking Rickie Lane, they shall never find him. They don't know what he really looks like, or what he really is. They don't know about any of us."

"*Any* of you?"

The smile became a wolfish grin. "Yes. I told you the secret, but you didn't realize it. About those of us who write murder stories, and who gain fame and fortune because our stories are so convincing. Naturally, we all write from life. And—oddly enough—most of us look alike too. Lombroso's old theory about criminal types, you know."

"But that's impossible! I've seen photographs of—"

"Yes. Of course you have. Do you think I'm the only one who's clever enough to use a make-up kit? Or to change my name? Most of the others use pseudonyms, too." His voice sank to a whisper. "Think for a moment. Who *is* Ellery Queen, really? Or Carter Dickson, or H. H. Holmes, or—"

"You can't mean it, not *all* of them!"

"Merely a theory, my dear. I speak only for myself when I tell you that your real detective-story writer conceals his identity and the crimes on which he bases his fictional narratives. I told you before that my chief problem is to concoct an imperfect crime—fundamentally, I am so constituted that I can ordinarily think only in terms of perfection. For I am a detective-story writer, and that means I am a master criminal."

Miss Kent writhed and tugged at her wrists.

"This time you won't succeed," she threatened. "They'll find you."

"Find who?" Mr. Pope shrugged. "My present disguise is abandoned. They'll never recognize me in my new one. And if they seek out Rickie Lane, their trail will end at that restaurant in Soho. Besides, they'll have quite a time discovering that you were the victim of foul play, not a suicide."

"Suicide?" Miss Kent gasped.

"Precisely. There will be an explanatory note downstairs—everything is arranged. I perfected my plans during a walk in the garden just now, after I remembered that I had this."

He stopped and groped for a moment in the corner of the room, coming up with a length of hempen coil in his hands.

"I shall just throw one end over the beam here," he said.

"Wait!" Miss Kent begged.

He nodded regretfully, then shook his head. "I know how you feel, dear lady," he told her. "But there really isn't any time to spare. I told you my next manuscript is due at the publisher's within a fortnight. *Ars longa vita brevis,* you know."

Bending forward, he made a knot and fastened the loop about her throat . . .

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The manuscript of *Mr. Pope Takes a Rope* reached the publishers precisely on the day of the deadline. When it appeared in print the critics were enthusiastic and the public ecstatic.

If Scotland Yard failed to share in the general enthusiasm it was merely because its operatives were trying in vain to unravel a knotty problem involving a noose, an apparent suicide, an abandoned cottage, and an untraceable gentleman who looked like a White Rabbit.

Meanwhile, bloodthirsty readers of Rickie Lane mysteries await the next volume in the series. As usual, there is no hint as to what may be forthcoming.

But just recently, in Cornwall, a debonair, mustachioed gentleman took up lodgings in the boarding house of an attractive divorcee.

The other morning he had occasion to step into the shop of the neighborhood ironmonger.

"My name is Mr. Stammer," he announced, "and I should like to purchase some household tools—"

COMING ATTRACTIONS . . .

Next Month	new stories by Thomas Walsh, Robert Bloch and Arthur Gordon; also a novelette by Ellery Queen
December issue	new stories by Rufus King, Shirley Barker, and L. A. G. Strong; also Herbert Brean, John Steinbeck
January issue	ALL-NEW issue including stories by Wade Miller, Christianna Brand, Rufus King, Anthony Gilbert
February issue	a new novelette by George Harmon Coxe; also Cornell Woolrich and Ellery Queen

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EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR: **NELSON ALGREN**

TITLE: ***He Swung and He Missed***

TYPE: Crime Story

LOCALE: Chicago

TIME: Not long ago

COMMENTS: *The author of* THE MAN WITH THE GOLDEN ARM, *judged the most distinguished American novel of 1949, and* A WALK ON THE WILD SIDE *gives us a prizefighting story that is both realistic and romantic, brutal and sentimental . . .*

IT WAS MISS DONAHUE OF PUBLIC School 24 who finally urged Rocco, in his fifteenth year, out of eighth grade and into the world. She had watched him fighting, at recess times, from his sixth year on. The kindergarten had had no recesses or it would have been from his fifth year. She had nurtured him personally through four trying semesters and so it was with something like enthusiasm that she wrote in his autograph book, the afternoon of graduation day, *Trusting that Rocco will make good.*

Ultimately, Rocco did. In his own way. He stepped from the schoolroom into the ring back of the Happy Hour Bar in a catchweight bout with an eight-dollar purse, winner take all. Rocco took it.

Uncle Mike Adler, local promoter, called the boy young Rocco after that and the name stuck. He fought through the middleweights and into the light-heavies, while his purses increased to as much as sixty dollars and expenses. In his nineteenth year he stopped growing, his purses stopped growing, and he married a girl called Lili.

He didn't win every one after

From THE NEON WILDERNESS, *published by Doubleday & Co., Inc.;*
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that, somehow, and by the time he was twenty-two he was losing as often as he won. He fought on. It was all he could do. He never took a dive; he never had a setup or a soft touch. He stayed away from whiskey; he never gambled; he went to bed early before every bout; and he loved his wife. He fought in a hundred corners of the city, under a half dozen managers, and he fought every man he was asked to, at any hour. He substituted, for better men, on as little as two hours' notice. He never ran out on a fight and he was never put down for a ten-count. He took beatings from the best in the business. But he never stayed down for ten.

He fought a comer from the Coast one night and took the worst beating of his career. But he was on his feet at the end. With a jaw broken in three places.

After that one he was hospitalized for three months and Lili went to work in a factory. She wasn't a strong girl and he didn't like it that she had to work. He fought again before his jaw was ready, and lost.

Yet even when he lost, the crowds liked him. They heckled him when he was introduced as Young Rocco, because he looked like thirty-four before he was twenty-six. Most of his hair had gone during his lay-off, and scar tissue over the eyes made him look less and less like a young anything. Friends came, friends left, money came in, was lost, was saved; he got the break on an occasional decision, and was occasionally robbed of a duke he'd earned. All things changed but his weight, which was 174, and his wife, who was Lili. And his record of never having been put down for ten. That stood, like his name. Which was forever Young Rocco.

That stuck to him like nothing else in the world but Lili.

At the end, which came when he was twenty-nine, all he had left was his record and his girl. Being twenty-nine, one of that pair had to go. He went six weeks without earning a dime before he came to that realization. When he found her wearing a pair of his old tennis shoes about the house, to save the heels of her only decent pair of shoes, he made up his mind.

Maybe Young Rocco wasn't the smartest pug in town, but he wasn't the punchiest either. Just because there was a dent in his face and a bigger one in his wallet, it didn't follow that his brain was dented. It wasn't. He knew what the score was. And he loved his girl.

He came into Uncle Mike's office looking for a fight and Mike was good enough not to ask what kind he wanted. He had a twenty-year-old named Solly Classki that he was bringing along under the billing of Kid Class. There was money back of the boy, no chances

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were to be taken. If Rocco was ready to dive, he had the fight. Uncle Mike put no pressure on Rocco. There were two light-heavies out in the gym ready to jump at the chance to dive for Solly Classki. All Rocco had to say was okay. His word was good enough for Uncle Mike. Rocco said it. And left the gym with the biggest purse of his career, and the first he'd gotten in advance, in his pocket; four twenties and two tens.

He gave Lili every dime of that money, and when he handed it over, he knew he was only doing the right thing for her. He had earned the right to sell out and he had sold. The ring owed him more than a C-note, he reflected soundly, and added loudly, for Lili's benefit, "I'll stop the bum dead in his tracks."

They were both happy that night. Rocco had never been happier since Graduation Day.

He had a headache all the way to the City Garden that night, but it lessened a little in the shadowed dressing room under the stands. The moment he saw the lights of the ring, as he came down the littered aisle alone, the ache sharpened once more.

Slouched unhappily in his corner for the windup, he watched the lights overhead swaying a little, and closed his eyes. When he opened them, a slow dust was rising toward the lights. He saw it sweep suddenly, swift and sidewise, high over the ropes and out across the dark and watchful rows. Below him someone pushed the warning buzzer.

He looked through Kid Class as they touched gloves, and glared sullenly over the boy's head while Ryan, the ref, hurried through the stuff about a clean break in the clinches. He felt the robe being taken from his shoulders, and suddenly in that one brief moment before the bell, he felt more tired than he ever had in a ring before. He went out in a half crouch and someone called out, "Cut him down, Solly."

He backed to make the boy lead, and then came in long enough to flick his left twice into the teeth and skitter away. The bleachers whooped, sensing blood. He'd give them their money's worth for a couple rounds, anyhow. No use making it look too bad.

In the middle of the second round he began sensing that the boy was telegraphing his right by pulling his left shoulder, and stepped in to trap it. The boy's left came back bloody and Rocco knew he'd been hit by the way the bleachers began again. It didn't occur to him that it was time to dive; he didn't even remember. Instead, he saw the boy telegraphing the right once more and the left protecting the heart, slipping loosely down toward the navel, the telltale left shoulder hunching—only

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it wasn't down, it wasn't a right. It wasn't to the heart. The boy's left snapped like a hurled rock between his eyes and he groped blindly for the other's arms, digging his chin sharply into the shoulder, hating the six-bit bunch out there for thinking he could be hurt so soon. He shoved the boy off, flashed his left twice into the teeth, burned him skillfully against the middle rope, and heeled him sharply as they broke. Then he skittered easily away. And the bell.

Down front, Mike Adler's eyes followed Rocco back to his corner.

Rocco came out for the third, fighting straight up, watching Solly's gloves coming languidly out of the other corner, dangling loosely a moment in the glare, and a flatiron smashed in under his heart so that he remembered, with sagging surprise, that he'd already been paid off. He caught his breath while following the indifferent gloves, thinking vaguely of Lili in oversize tennis shoes. The gloves drifted backward and dangled loosely with little to do but catch light idly four feet away. The right broke again beneath his heart and he grunted in spite of himself; the boy's close-cropped head followed in, cockily, no higher than Rocco's chin but coming neckless straight down to the shoulders. And the gloves were gone again. The boy was faster than he looked. And the pain in Rocco's head settled down to a steady beating.

The great strength of a fighting man is his pride. That was Young Rocco's strength in the rounds that followed. The boy called Kid Class couldn't keep him down. He was down in the fourth, twice in the fifth, and again in the seventh. In that round he stood with his back against the ropes, standing the boy off with his left in the seconds before the bell. He had the trick of looking impassive when he was hurt, and his face at the bell looked as impassive as a catcher's mitt.

Between that round and the eighth Uncle Mike climbed into the ring beside Young Rocco. He said nothing. Just stood there looking down. He thought Rocco might have forgotten. He'd had four chances to stay down and he hadn't taken one. Rocco looked up. "I'm clear as a bell," he told Uncle Mike. He hadn't forgotten a thing.

Uncle Mike climbed back into his seat, resigned to anything that might happen. He understood better than Young Rocco. Rocco couldn't stay down until his knees would fail to bring him up. Uncle Mike sighed. He decided he liked Young Rocco. Somehow, he didn't feel as sorry for him as he had in the gym.

"I hope he makes it," he found himself hoping. The crowd felt differently. They had seen the lean and scarred Italian drop his man here twenty times before, the way

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he was trying to keep from being dropped himself now. They felt it was his turn. They were standing up in the rows to see it. The dust came briefly between. A tired moth struggled lamely upward toward the lights. And the bell.

Ryan came over between rounds, hooked Rocco's head back with a crooked forefinger on the chin, after Rocco's Negro handler had stopped the bleeding with collodion, and muttered something about the thing going too far. Rocco spat.

"Awright, Solly, drop it on him," someone called across the ropes.

It sounded, somehow, like money to Rocco. It sounded like somebody was being shortchanged out there.

But Solly stayed away, hands low, until the eighth was half gone. Then he was wide with a right, held and butted as they broke; Rocco felt the blood and got rid of some of it on the boy's left breast. He trapped the boy's left, rapping the kidneys fast before grabbing the arms again, and pressed his nose firmly into the hollow of the other's throat to arrest its bleeding. Felt the blood trickling into the hollow there as into a tiny cup. Rocco put his feet together and a glove on both of Kid Class's shoulders, to shove him sullenly away. And must have looked strong doing it, for he heard the crowd murmur a little. He was in Solly's corner at the bell and moved back to his own corner with his head held high, to control the bleeding. When his handler stopped it again, he knew, at last, that his own pride was doublecrossing him. And felt glad for that much. Let them worry out there in the rows. He'd been shortchanged since Graduation Day; let them be on the short end tonight. He had the hundred—he'd get a job in a garage and forget every one of them.

It wasn't until the tenth and final round that Rocco realized he wanted to kayo the boy—because it wasn't until then that he realized he could. Why not do the thing up the right way? He felt his tiredness fall from him, like an old cloak. This was his fight, his round. He'd end like he'd started, as a fighting man. And saw Solly Kid Class shuffling his shoulders forward uneasily. The boy would be a full-sized heavy in another six months. He bulled him into the ropes and felt the boy fade sidewise. Rocco caught him off balance with his left, hook-fashion, into the short ribs. The boy chopped back with his left uncertainly, as though he might have jammed the knuckles, and held. In a half-rolling clinch along the ropes, he saw Solly's mouthpiece projecting, slipping halfway in and halfway out, and then swallowed in again with a single tortured twist of the lips. He got an arm loose and banged the boy back of

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the ear with an overhand right that must have looked funny because the crowd laughed a little. Solly smeared his glove across his nose, came halfway in and changed his mind, left himself wide and was almost steady until Rocco feinted him into a knot and brought the right looping from the floor with even his toes behind it.

Solly stepped in to let it breeze past, and hooked his right hard to the button. Then the left. Rocco's mouthpiece went spinning in an arc into the lights. Then the right again.

Rocco spun halfway around and stood looking sheepishly out at the rows. Kid Class saw only his man's back; Rocco was out on his feet. He walked slowly along the ropes, tapping them idly with his glove and smiling vacantly down at the newspapermen, who smiled back. Solly looked at the referee. Ryan nodded toward Rocco. Kid Class came up fast behind his man and threw the left under the armpit flush onto the point of the chin, Rocco went forward on the ropes and hung there, his chin catching the second strand, and hung on and on, like a man decapitated . . .

He came to in the locker room under the stands, watching the steam swimming about the pipes directly overhead. Uncle Mike was somewhere near, telling him he had done fine, and then he was alone. They were all gone then, all the six-bit hecklers and the iron-throated boys in the sixty-cent seats. He rose heavily and dressed slowly, feeling a long relief that he'd come to the end. He'd done it the hard way, but he'd done it. Let them all go.

He was fixing his tie, taking more time with it than it required, when she knocked. He called to her to come in. She had never seen him fight, but he knew she must have listened on the radio or she wouldn't be down now.

She tested the adhesive over his right eye timidly, fearing to hurt him with her touch, but wanting to be sure it wasn't loose.

"I'm okay," he assured her easily. "We'll celebrate a little 'n forget the whole business." It wasn't until he kissed her that her eyes avoided him; it wasn't till then that he saw she was trying not to cry. He patted her shoulder.

"There's nothin' wrong, Lil'—a couple days' rest 'n I'll be in the pink again."

Then saw it wasn't that after all.

"You told me you'd win," the girl told him. "I got eight to one and put the whole damn bank roll on you. I wanted to surprise you, and now we ain't got a cryin' dime."

Rocco didn't blow up. He just felt a little sick. Sicker than he had ever felt in his life. He walked away from the girl and sat on the rubbing table, studying the floor. She had sense enough not to both-

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er him until he'd realized what the score was. Then he looked up, studying her from foot to head. His eyes didn't rest on her face: they went back to her feet—to the scarred toes of the only decent shoes. And a shadow passed over his heart.

"You got good odds, honey," he told her thoughtfully. "You done just right. We made 'em sweat all night for their money." Then he looked up and grinned. A wide, white grin.

That was all she needed to know it was okay after all. She went to him so he could tell her how okay it really was.

That was like Young Rocco, from Graduation Day. He always did it the hard way; but he always did it.

Miss Donahue would have been proud.

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EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR: **WILLIAM O'FARRELL**

TITLE: ***The High, Warm Place***

TYPE: Crime-Suspense Story

LOCALE: United States

TIME: The Present

COMMENTS: *John Bannerman, the writer of sensational stories, came back to the house of his childhood—a house that still smelled of age and unhappiness, a house that had always been cruel and unlucky . . .*

THE HOUSE WAS AS HE REMEMbered it except for the fact that his memories were of spring and summer, and now the ground and the drive leading to the house were covered with snow. His were warm weather memories of grass and flowers, and that was odd because he had passed five winters here, and it had been winter when they had taken him away. He got out of his car and crunched through snow to the front steps. He climbed to the broad porch and pressed the bell. The door was opened by a maid.

"Yes, sir?"

"Miss Meredith, please. My name is Bannerman."

She frowned and took an uneasy backward step. "Come in. I'll tell Miss Meredith you're here." He gave her his hat and coat and entered the room hesitantly, as though unsure of what he might find.

It was a large, dark room that seemed unchanged from the way he had known it as a child. The furniture was different and differently arranged, but the effect that it produced was basically the same. Then he heard a subdued, slow ticking and realized that one article of furniture had not been changed. He walked with growing excitement to the tall grandfather's clock in a far corner. The big brass pendulum, the quarters of the moon, the familiar shifting land-

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scapes—there was no possibility that he could be mistaken. It was his own clock. He smiled and stretched his hand toward the glass door and the dark gleaming wood.

The odor of the house rushed into his nostrils as the affectionate gesture was about to be completed. He had not been aware of it before. His left cheek twitched and he jerked his hand back sharply. The house smelled of age and of unhappiness. It always had. He sat in a chair and, observing this part of the room, felt that it too was critically observing him. Miss Meredith's eyes, when he turned and saw her looking at him, might have been the room's eyes. They were reserved and critical.

He jumped up quickly. "I'm sorry. I didn't hear you. I'm John Bannerman."

She nodded. "Georgiana Meredith. I came in quietly because I wanted to study you. I've been wondering what kind of man would write the kind of books you do."

"Did you reach any conclusion?"

"Yes, I did. Sit down, Mr. Bannerman. Ah, here's tea!"

She poured tea from the silver service brought in by the nervous maid, and to the tea she added rum. Bannerman's cup was lightly laced; her own allotment was more generous. She sipped experimentally, nodded approval, and then took a larger drink. Her eyes grew brighter and assumed a queer bird-like expression. There was something queer about Georgiana Meredith, he thought, any way you looked at her.

She was about his own age, thirty-five, or possibly a few years older, and would not have been bad looking if she had bothered to make herself attractive. Her straw-colored hair was drawn straight back and secured with a heavy ornamental pin, so that the tresses fell limply halfway down her back. The two spots of vivid rouge on her cheekbones were so perfectly round that they might have been outlined with a compass and filled in afterward. They were like stop signals on the gray and empty boulevard that was her face. She wore a cotton dress, horizontally striped, that accentuated the bulkiness of her hips and breasts, and a long necklace of what looked like yellow marbles fell to the same distance down the front of her dress as her hair did behind.

"More tea?" she asked.

"No, thanks. What kind of man would write books like mine, Miss Meredith?"

"The same kind that would send me a letter asking permission to visit the house where he was born. Incidentally, I showed your letter to my analyst. He said, 'Poor chap's looking for something he'll never find.'"

"I can't imagine why he'd say a thing like that. There's nothing unusual in a man being interested

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in his birthplace—particularly when it happens to have been his father's birthplace, too. And if he just happens to be passing through the town—"

Her eager leaning forward was an interruption in itself. "Did you just *happen* to be passing through? Or did you come here hoping—impossibly, I assure you—to recapture some intangible essence of your childhood?" She laughed, suddenly. "Here I am up to my old trick of asking personal questions! A great fault, my analyst tells me. He says sometimes he isn't sure whether I'm his patient or he's mine."

Bannerman smiled politely. The staircase was in a corner of the room. It climbed to a sitting room, he knew, and a door opened from the sitting room to the service stairs if one wanted to climb still higher. He did. He wanted very much to look out of a window in the huge room on the top floor of the house. He'd been only five years old the last time he had done it, and he would have to take his own physical changes into consideration. But it was mostly, he remembered, a matter of assuming the correct position. He was sure it could be done. He stared at the steps—particularly at the bottom step of the staircase. A runner covered all the steps, including the bottom one.

"Where are you going?" Miss Meredith asked.

He stopped, bewildered. Until she spoke he had not realized that he had risen and was plodding across the room toward the stairs.

"Nowhere," he said, after a moment. "I was only—"

"It's not here, is it?"

"What isn't?"

She shrugged. "Whatever it is you're looking for."

"Believe me, Miss Meredith, I'm not looking for anything. Certainly not for a pocket-size analysis of motives that I never had. I knew a nurse once who defined a psychiatrist as a doctor who was too lazy to work, and I'm inclined to agree with that definition. I don't want to be rude, but that's the way I feel."

"My dear man, think nothing of it. There's always antagonism at first. Sometimes months pass before the patient arrives at the transference stage. And of course you *are* looking for something—we all are."

"You, too?"

She nodded. "But I'll find what I'm looking for. That's the difference between us. You're not married, are you, Mr. Bannerman?"

The question startled him. "Why do you ask?"

"You're edgy. Married men are usually more settled, less excitable."

"Single men have no monopoly on edginess," he said stiffly. "You're a little on the excitable side yourself."

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She raised eyebrows which, he now noted, were no more than two arched lines of paint. "It's strange that you should think so. People often remark on my self-control and realistic point of view. Do you know something? I don't believe you've ever been in love."

"Really, Miss Meredith! All these speculations—"

She said, "I think everyone should be in love, even if it's only with an idea."

"Are you in love with an idea?"

"Passionately." The yellow beads clicked like a rosary as she got up. "Poor Mr. Bannerman! I've made you uncomfortable, haven't I? I'm sorry. Come along—I'll take you through the house."

She was right about having made him uncomfortable. He followed her silently on a tour of inspection of the lower floor. Library, dining room, butler's pantry, and eventually back to the living room again. Then they started up the stairs.

Suddenly he stopped, returned to the foot of the staircase, and tried to lift the slight ledge projecting from the lowest step. It wouldn't budge. The runner held it down.

Miss Meredith had also stopped. "What on earth are you trying to do?"

"Doesn't this bottom step open like a box?"

"Certainly not."

"But I remember opening it. I used to do it often—I kept my toys in here."

She laughed. "Pull up the runner if you don't believe me. See?" she said when, the carpet removed, he tugged unsuccessfully at the projecting ledge. "It's solid. You must have been an imaginative child."

He was still looking at the step. "I could have sworn—"

"Highly imaginative," she went on, "in a twisted way. It shows in the books you write—in the melodramatic hack-work you put out."

He raised his head slowly, feeling his eyes grow hot. He tried, but couldn't control the twitching in his cheek. "Hack-work?"

"Oh, come now." Her expression was that of a tolerantly chiding aunt. "What else would you call novels about murder and sex in their more sordid aspects? It's a legitimate form of escape and nothing to be ashamed of, but you certainly don't pretend it's literature. Well," she said, "if you're satisfied that step is firmly nailed, we'll go upstairs."

Trailing her up the staircase, his resentful eyes were on a level with her hips. He hated her. He hadn't felt such hatred since . . . since he had left this house. It was a cruel house, and eventually it imparted its brutality to the people who lived in it. Of all its many rooms there was only one that was high and safe and warm.

Georgiana Meredith slept in the

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east room that had been his mother's. Next to it was the small room that had been his. His father's old bedroom was in the front of the house. The next room, opposite his mother's, was where Lucille had slept. He stood for several minutes looking down at the strange bed that was in the place where Lucille's bed had once been.

Miss Meredith was watching him. "I believe this was your sister's room. She died here, didn't she?"

He swung around to face her. "How did you learn about Lucille?"

"By asking questions, naturally, and having my maid do the same thing. As soon as I read your letter I went calling on the neighbors. One old man, a Mr. Garvey, had known your family well. The old boy's quite senile. He said this house had brought you Bannermans bad luck."

"That's very true. It killed my grandfather while he was building it. It killed my sister and ruined the lives of both my parents."

"Fantastic! If your grandfather hadn't had a few too many drinks he would have seen that falling beam. As for your father, Mr. Garvey says that Lucille's accident disturbed him so severely that he walked out of the house and no one ever saw him again. Maybe he recovered and was happy. How can anybody know?"

"My mother—"

"Your mother lived a more or less normal life, although it was probably shortened by the shock of your grandfather's accident and the desertion of your father." She paused, then murmured, "Fascinating, isn't it? The idea of death, I mean. They say your father searched for you before he left. Where were you hiding, by the way?"

"In the house." Bannerman's voice was strained and seemed to come from a distance. "In a place nobody knows about but me."

"You're very secretive—but I understand, of course. That's symptomatic, too."

He said, "Miss Meredith, ever since we've started talking you've dropped one hint after another that something's wrong with me. I'd appreciate it if you'd tell me what you think it is."

"Don't you know, Mr. Bannerman? Don't you really know? You can talk to me quite freely. I'm your friend."

"Thanks for telling me. Will you answer my question, please?"

She shook her head. Her eyes were wide and in them were two laughing points of flame. "We'll take the service stairs to the top floor. If I'm not mistaken, that's where you really want to go."

He followed her from the bedroom and across the sitting room to the door that opened on the service stairs. Stepping in front of her, he turned the knob. "Would you mind if I went up alone?"

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She seemed to be repressing an impulse to giggle. "As you please."

He opened the door, closed it behind him, and ran up the stairs.

Then he was in the big, tall-ceilinged room where he and Lucille had played that winter afternoon. He hurried to the French window that opened on the little porch. He went out on the porch, leaned backward over the railing, and stared up into the eaves of the old house, seeking for an opening into the high, warm place—the only place left for him in the world.

At first he didn't see it. He had a grim, despairing moment before the dark wood finally opened up for him and let him look inside. The place was still there, as he had known it would be. Lucille had lied that afternoon.

He had shown it to her and she had teased him by insisting she could not see it. He had held her so she wouldn't fall, and she'd looked up into the eaves and laughed. From the prim seniority of three years she had called him crazy. "I can't see anything. You're crazy. Mother thinks you're crazy, too. I heard her telling Dad."

"You didn't!"

"Did, too. She said, 'Johnny will never amount to much. He acts perfectly crazy sometimes.'"

Lucille's attitude had been the disparaging one Bannerman had come to know so well. When people couldn't understand a thing, they refused to see it. He had known this now for thirty years, and he knew that during the past two years this widespread myopia had increased alarmingly.

Two years before he'd had a manuscript rejected. "Sorry, John," the editor had written, "this doesn't get across." There had been other rejections since. "I can't understand just what you're driving at" and "This isn't clear." The lack of money, always a problem, worried him like a nagging headache. It was then that he had started having his recurrent dream about the old house.

The day before yesterday he had written Miss Meredith a letter, got into his car, and started out. He had to make sure that the refuge he had once known was still there. It was. It was right here, and would be here when he needed it. Its very existence calmed him. It was quite possible he wouldn't need it now.

Miss Meredith's voice came from only a few feet away. She was standing in the French window. "Didn't I warn you? I knew you wouldn't find it."

He straightened slowly. "I found it. It's under the eaves," he said. "It's where I hid when my father was looking for me after Lucille died. He looked everywhere and couldn't find me. He went downstairs and walked out of the house. I came out then. I knew it would be safe."

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"And now you're not safe, is that it? You want to hide again but there isn't any hiding place."

"There is! The opening's right here," he said. "Lean backward over the rail and look straight up."

She shrugged and did as he had told her. He held her as he'd held Lucille. "I don't see anything," she said.

"It's right above you—where the eaves and wall are joined. What's the matter, woman—can't you use your eyes?"

"Nothing. I see absolutely nothing. Is this where you killed your sister, Mr. Bannerman? Were you holding her like this?" Leaning backward, she put her arms around his neck and suddenly kissed him. Close up, he saw her astonishingly bright, excited eyes.

He let her go as he had let Lucille go.

She didn't scream until the instant before she hit the ground. She died faster than Lucille had. Lucille had managed to tell her father before she died.

The maid ran from the back porch and made an awful racket over the body. Neighbors began to gather, and John Bannerman moved fast. He hurried downstairs and opened the step at the bottom of the staircase. It opened without difficulty now. His fine, beloved toys were there. He gathered them all up, carried them to the high, warm place, and crawled inside. Then he closed his eyes and curled up and was safe.

ONCE AGAIN . . .

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EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR: **AGATHA CHRISTIE**

TITLE: ***The Cat and the Chestnut***

TYPE: Detective Story

DETECTIVE: Mr. Parker Pyne

LOCALE: London

COMMENTS: *Advertisement in the Personal Column: "Are you happy? If not, consult Mr. Parker Pyne." And if Mr. P.P. takes your case, its success is a foregone conclusion—P.P. guarantees it.*

THE BUZZER ON MR. PARKER Pyne's desk purred discreetly. "Yes?" said the great man.

"A young lady wishes to see you," announced his secretary. "She has no appointment."

"You may send her in, Miss Lemon." A moment later he was shaking hands with his visitor. "Good morning," he said. "Do sit down."

The girl sat down and looked at Mr. Parker Pyne. She was a pretty girl and quite young. Her hair was dark and wavy with a row of curls at the nape of the neck. She was beautifully turned out from the white knitted cap on her head to the cobweb stockings and dainty shoes. Clearly she was nervous.

"You are Mr. Parker Pyne?" she asked.

"I am."

"The one who—who—advertises?"

"The one who advertises."

"You say that if people aren't—aren't happy—to—to come to you."

"Yes."

She took the plunge. "Well, I'm frightfully unhappy. So I thought I'd come along and just—and just see."

Mr. Parker Pyne waited. He felt there was more to come.

"I—I'm in frightful trouble." She clenched her hands nervously.

"So I see," said Mr. Parker Pyne. "Do you think you could tell me about it?"

© 1932 by Agatha Christie; originally titled "The Case of the Distressed Lady"

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That, it seemed, was what the girl was by no means sure of. She stared at Mr. Parker Pyne with a desperate intentness. Suddenly she spoke with a rush.

"Yes, I will tell you. I've made up my mind now. I've been nearly crazy with worry. I didn't know what to do or whom to go to. And then I saw your advertisement. I thought it was probably just a publicity stunt, but it stayed in my mind. It sounded so comforting, somehow. And then I thought—well, it would do no harm to come and *see*. I could always make an excuse and get away again if I didn't—well, if it didn't—"

"Quite so, quite so," said Mr. Pyne.

"You see," said the girl, "it means —well, *trusting* somebody."

"And you feel you can trust me?" he said, smiling.

"It's odd," said the girl with unconscious rudeness, "but I do. Without knowing anything about you! I'm *sure* I can trust you."

"I can assure you," said Mr. Pyne, "that your trust will not be misplaced."

"Then," said the girl, "I'll tell you about it. My name is Daphne St. John."

"Yes, Miss St. John."

"Mrs. I'm—I'm married."

"Pshaw!" muttered Mr. Pyne, annoyed with himself as he noted the platinum circlet on the third finger of her left hand. "Stupid of me."

"If I weren't married," said the girl, "I shouldn't mind so much. I mean, it wouldn't matter so much. It's the thought of Gerald— Well, here—here's what all the trouble's about!"

She dived in her bag, took something out, and flung it down on the desk where, gleaming and flashing, it rolled over to Mr. Parker Pyne.

It was a platinum ring with a large solitaire diamond.

Mr. Pyne picked it up, took it to the window, applied a jeweler's lens to his eye, and examined it closely.

"An exceedingly fine diamond," he remarked, coming back to the table, "worth, I should say, about two thousand pounds at least."

"Yes. And it's stolen! I stole it! And I don't know what to do."

"Dear me," said Mr. Parker Pyne. "This is very interesting."

His client broke down and sobbed into an inadequate handkerchief.

"Now, now," said Mr. Pyne. "Everything's going to be all right."

The girl dried her eyes and sniffed. "Is it?" she said. "Oh, *is* it?"

"Of course it is. Now, just tell me the whole story."

"Well, it began by my being hard up. You see, I'm frightfully extravagant. And Gerald gets so annoyed about it. Gerald's my husband. He's a lot older than I am, and he's got very—well, very au-

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stere ideas. He thinks running into debt is dreadful. So I didn't tell him. And I went over to Le Touquet with some friends and I thought perhaps I might be lucky at chemmy and get straight again. I did win at first. And then I lost, and then I thought I must go on. And I went on. And—and—"

"Yes, yes," said Mr. Parker Pyne. "You need not go into details. You found yourself in a worse plight than ever. That is right, is it not?"

Daphne St. John nodded. "And by then, you see, I simply couldn't tell Gerald. Because he hates gambling. Oh, I was in an awful mess. Well, we went down to stay with the Dortheimers near Cobham. He's frightfully rich, of course. His wife, Naomi, was at school with me. She's pretty and a dear. While we were there, the setting of this ring got loose. On the morning we were leaving, she asked me to take it up to town and drop it at her jeweler's in Bond Street." She paused.

"And now we come to the difficult part," said Mr. Pyne helpfully. "Go on, Mrs. St. John."

"You won't ever tell, will you?" demanded the girl pleadingly.

"My clients' confidences are sacred. And anyway, Mrs. St. John, you have told me so much already that I could probably finish the story for myself."

"That's true. All right. But I hate saying it—it sounds so awful. I went to Bond Street. There's another shop there—Viro's. They—they copy jewelry. Suddenly I lost my head. I took the ring in and said I wanted an exact copy; I said I was going abroad and didn't want to take real jewelry with me. They thought it quite natural.

"Well, I got the paste replica—it was so good you couldn't have told it from the original—and I sent it off by registered post to Lady Dortheimer. I had a box with her jeweler's name on it, so that was all right, and I made a professional-looking parcel. And then I —I—pawned the real one." She hid her face in her hands. "How could I? How *could* I? I was just a low, mean, common thief."

Mr. Parker Pyne coughed. "I do not think you have quite finished," he said.

"No, I haven't. This, you understand, was about six weeks ago. I paid off all my debts and got square again, but, of course, I was miserable all the time. And then an old cousin of mine died and I came into some money. The first thing I did was to redeem the wretched ring. Well, that's all right —here it is. But something terribly difficult has happened."

"Yes?"

"We've had a quarrel with the Dortheimers. It's over some shares that Sir Ralph persuaded Gerald to buy. He was terribly let in over them and he told Sir Ralph what he thought of him—and oh, it's all dreadful! And now, you see, I can't get the ring back."

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"Couldn't you send it to Lady Dortheimer anonymously?"

"That would give the whole thing away. She'll examine her own ring, find it's a fake, and guess at once what I've done."

"You say she is a friend of yours. What about telling her the whole truth—throwing yourself on her mercy?"

Mrs. St. John shook her head. "We're not such friends as that. Where money or jewelry is concerned, Naomi's as hard as nails. Perhaps she wouldn't prosecute me if I gave the ring back, but she would tell everyone what I've done and I'd be ruined. Gerald would know and he would never forgive me. Oh, how awful everything is!" She began to cry again. "I've thought and I've thought, and I can't see *what* to do! Oh, Mr. Pyne, can't you do anything?"

"Several things," said Mr. Parker Pyne.

"You can? Really?"

"Certainly. I suggested the simplest way because in my long experience I have always found it the best. It avoids unlooked-for complications. Still, I see the force of your objections. You are sure no one else knows of this unfortunate occurrence but yourself?"

"Only you," said Mrs. St. John.

"Oh, I do not count. Well, then, your secret is safe at present. All that is needed is to exchange the rings in some unsuspicious manner."

"That's it," the girl said eagerly.

"That should not be difficult. We must take a little time to consider the best method—"

She interrupted him. "But there is no time! That's what's driving me nearly crazy. She's going to have the ring reset."

"How do you know?"

"Just by chance. I was lunching with a woman the other day and I admired a ring she had on—a big emerald. She said it was the newest thing—and that Naomi Dortheimer was going to have her diamond reset that way."

"Which means that we shall have to act quickly," said Mr. Pyne thoughtfully.

"Yes, yes."

"It means gaining admission to the house—and if possible not in a menial capacity. Servants have little chance of handling valuable rings. Have you any ideas yourself, Mrs. St. John?"

"Well, Naomi is giving a big party on Wednesday. And this friend of mine mentioned that she had been looking for some exhibition dancers. I don't know if anything has been settled—"

"I think that can be managed," said Mr. Parker Pyne. "If the matter is already settled it will be more expensive, that is all. One thing more, do you happen to know where the main light switch is situated?"

"As it happens I *do* know that, because a fuse blew out late one

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night after the servants had all gone to bed. It's a box at the back of the hall—inside a little cupboard."

At Mr. Parker Pyne's request she drew him a sketch.

"And now," said Mr. Parker Pyne, "everything is going to be all right, so don't worry, Mrs. St. John. What about the ring? Shall I take it now, or would you rather keep it till Wednesday?"

"Well, perhaps I'd better keep it."

"Now, no more worry, mind you," Mr. Parker Pyne admonished her.

"And your—fee?" she asked.

"That can wait for the moment. I will let you know on Wednesday what expenses have been necessary. The fee itself will be nominal, I assure you."

He conducted her to the door, then rang the buzzer on his desk.

"Send Claude and Madeleine here."

Claude Luttrell was one of the handsomest specimens of lounge lizard to be found in England. Madeleine de Sara was the most seductive of adventuresses.

Mr. Parker Pyne surveyed them with approval. "My children," he said, "I have a job for you. You are going to be internationally famous exhibition dancers. Now, attend to this carefully, Claude, and mind you get it right . . ."

Lady Dortheimer was fully satisfied with the arrangements for her ball. She surveyed the floral decorations and approved, gave a few last orders to the butler, and remarked to her husband that so far nothing had gone wrong.

It was a slight disappointment that Michael and Juanita, the dancers from the Red Admiral night club, had been unable to fulfill their contract at the last moment, owing to Juanita's spraining her ankle, but instead, two new dancers were being sent (so ran the story over the telephone) who had created a furor in Paris.

The dancers duly arrived and Lady Dortheimer approved. The evening went splendidly. Jules and Sanchia did their turn, and most sensational it was—a wild Spanish dance. Then a dance called the Degenerate's Dream. Then an exquisite exhibition of modern ballroom dancing.

The "cabaret" over, normal dancing was resumed. The handsome Jules requested a dance with Lady Dortheimer. They floated away. Never had Lady Dortheimer had such a perfect partner.

Sir Ralph was searching for the seductive Sanchia—in vain. She was not in the ballroom.

She was, as a matter of fact, out in the deserted hall near a small box, with her eyes fixed on the jeweled watch which she wore round her wrist.

"You are not English—you cannot be English—to dance as you do," murmured Jules into Lady

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Dortheimer's ear. "You are the sprite, the spirit of the wind. *Droushcka petrovka navarouchi.*"

"What is that language?"

"Russian," said Jules mendaciously. "I say something to you in Russian that I dare not say in English."

Lady Dortheimer closed her eyes. Jules pressed her closer to him.

Suddenly the lights went out. In the darkness Jules bent and kissed the hand that lay on his shoulder. As she made to draw it away, he caught it, raised it to his lips again. Somehow a ring slipped from her finger into his hand.

To Lady Dortheimer it seemed only a second before the lights went on again. Jules was smiling at her.

"Your ring," he said. "It slipped off. You permit?" He replaced it on her finger. His eyes said a number of things while he was doing it.

Sir Ralph was talking about the main switch. "Some idiot. Practical joke, I suppose."

Lady Dortheimer was not interested. Those few minutes of darkness had been very pleasant.

Mr. Parker Pyne arrived at his office on Thursday morning to find Mrs. St. John already awaiting him.

"Show her in," said Mr. Pyne.

"Well?" She was all eagerness.

"You look pale," he said accusingly.

She shook her head. "I couldn't sleep last night. I was wondering—"

"Now, here is the bill for expenses. Train fares, costumes, and fifty pounds to Michael and Juanita. Sixty-five pounds, seventeen shillings."

"Yes, yes! But about last night—was it all right? Did it happen?"

Mr. Parker Pyne looked at her in surprise. "My dear young lady, naturally it is all right. I took it for granted that you understood that."

"What a relief! I was afraid—"

Mr. Parker Pyne shook his head reproachfully. "Failure is a word not tolerated in this establishment. If I do not think I can succeed I refuse to undertake a case. If I do take a case, its success is a foregone conclusion."

"She's really got her ring back and suspects nothing?"

"Nothing whatever. The operation was most delicately conducted."

Daphne St. John sighed. "You don't know the load off my mind. What were you saying about expenses?"

"Sixty-five pounds, seventeen shillings."

Mrs. St. John opened her bag and counted out the money. Mr. Parker Pyne thanked her and wrote out a receipt.

"But your fee?" murmured Daphne. "This is only for expenses."

"In this case there is no fee."

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"Oh, Mr. Pyne! I couldn't, *really*!"

"My dear young lady, I insist. I will not touch a penny. It would be against my principles. Here is your receipt. And now—"

With the smile of a happy conjurer bringing off a successful trick, he drew a small box from his pocket and pushed it across the table. Daphne opened it. Inside, to all appearances, lay the identical diamond ring.

"Brute!" said Mrs. St. John, making a face at the ring. "How I hate you! I've a good mind to throw you out the window."

"I shouldn't do that," said Mr. Pyne. "It might surprise people."

"You're quite sure it isn't the real one?" said Daphne.

"No, no! The one you showed me the other day is safely on Lady Dortheimer's finger."

"Then that's all right." Daphne rose with a happy laugh.

"Curious your asking me that," said Mr. Parker Pyne. "Of course Claude, poor fellow, isn't very brainy. He might easily have got muddled. So, to make sure, I had an expert look at this ring this morning."

Mrs. St. John sat down again rather suddenly. "Oh! And he said?"

"That it was an extraordinarily good imitation," said Mr. Parker Pyne, beaming. "First-class work. So that sets your mind at rest, doesn't it?"

Mrs. St. John started to say something, then stopped. She was staring at Mr. Parker Pyne.

The latter resumed his seat behind the desk and looked at her benevolently. "The cat who pulled the chestnut out of the fire," he said dreamily. "Not a pleasant role. Not a role I should care to have any of my staff undertake. Excuse me. Did you say anything?"

"I—no, nothing."

"Good. I want to tell you a little story, Mrs. St. John. It concerns a young lady. A fair-haired young lady, I think. She is not married. Her name is not St. John. Her Christian name is not Daphne. On the contrary, her name is Ernestine Richards, and until recently she was secretary to Lady Dortheimer.

"Well, one day the setting of Lady Dortheimer's diamond ring became loose and Miss Richards brought it up to town to have it fixed. Quite like your story, is it not? The same idea occurred to Miss Richards that occurred to you. She had the ring copied. But she was a far-sighted young lady. She saw a day coming when Lady Dortheimer would discover the substitution. When that happened, she would remember who had taken the ring to town and Miss Richards would be instantly suspected.

"So what happened? First, I fancy, Miss Richards invested in a La Merveilleuse transformation—Number Seven side parting, I

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think"—his eyes rested innocently on his client's wavy locks—"shade dark brown. Then she called on me. She showed me the ring, allowed me to satisfy myself that it was genuine, thereby disarming suspicion on my part. That done, and a plan of substitution arranged, the young lady took the ring to the jeweler, who, in due course, returned it to Lady Dortheimer.

"Yesterday evening the other ring—the one with the false diamond—was hurriedly handed over at Waterloo Station. Quite rightly, Miss Richards did not consider that Mr. Luttrell was likely to be an authority on diamonds. But just to satisfy myself that everything was aboveboard I arranged for a friend of mine, a diamond merchant, to be on the train. He looked at the ring and pronounced at once, 'This is not a real diamond; it is an excellent paste replica.'

"You see the point, of course, Mrs. St. John? When Lady Dortheimer discovered her loss, what would she remember? The charming young dancer who slipped the ring off her finger when the lights went out! She would make inquiries and find that the dancers originally engaged were bribed not to come. If matters were traced back to my office, my story of a Mrs. St. John would seem feeble in the extreme. Lady Dortheimer never knew a Mrs. St. John.

"Now you see, don't you, that I could not allow that? And so my friend Claude replaced on Lady Dortheimer's finger *the same ring that he took off.*" Mr. Parker Pyne's smile was less benevolent now.

"You see why I could not take a fee? I guarantee to give happiness. Clearly I have not made *you* happy. I will say just one thing more. You are young; possibly this is your first attempt at anything of the kind. Now I, on the contrary, am comparatively advanced in years, and I have had a long experience in the compilation of statistics. From that experience I can assure you that in eighty-seven per cent of cases dishonesty does not pay—eighty-seven per cent. Think of it!"

With a brusque movement the pseudo Mrs. St. John rose. "You oily old brute!" she said. "Lead me on! Making me pay expenses! And all the time—" She choked, and rushed toward the door.

"Your ring," said Mr. Parker Pyne, holding it out to her.

She snatched it from him, looked at it, then flung it out of the open window.

A door banged and she was gone.

Mr. Parker Pyne was looking out of the window with some interest. "As I thought," he said. "Considerable surprise has been created. Imagine—if it rained diamonds!"

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EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR: **EVANS HARRINGTON**

TITLE: ***Out of the Midst of the Fire***

TYPE: Crime-Detective Story

LOCALE: Tucker County in the Deep South

TIME: The Present

COMMENTS: *Lonnie's father had been murdered by the Big Man of the county. Everyone knew it, but there were not 12 men in the whole county who would even sit on a jury, much less testify. Lonnie, only 18, found himself torn between vengeance and the sixth commandment.*

LONNIE HAD FORGOTTEN IT WAS SATURDAY. The square was choked with wagons and buggies and horses and mules. And the people, on the board sidewalks, milling in and out among the wagons and buggies, were everywhere, everywhere! And all of them staring.

Alvin Tubbs, Red Wilson, and several other boys were standing in front of Bishop's Barber Shop. They were talking and laughing, but when they saw him they stopped. Lonnie sat very straight on his horse, Dan, and did not look at them; but he could feel their eyes. The sweat broke out on his face in little tingling pinpoints.

He guided Dan over to the hitching rail and tied him. He stooped under the rail, dodged around a big oak tree, and stepped up on the courthouse lawn. Alvin Tubbs and the others were crossing the square. They seemed to be just strolling, and they kept their heads lowered or turned away; but he could see they were following him.

And Lonnie started not to go in then. He knew what they would say, even if it did some good, even if Harvey Beasley could help him or would help him. They would sneer at him still and say that he was a coward, that he had to get Harvey Beasley to do what he should have done himself.

Again he found himself desper-

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ately trying to think what to do. But he was past thinking—he had been past thinking for a week, ever since he stood at the fence of Lex Waters's pasture and saw his father lying there. And now Alvin Tubbs and the others were coming closer. They might call to him any minute. He whirled and went quickly up the steps into the courthouse.

Harvey Beasley was a gaunt, big-boned man. His eyes were light gray in his dark leathery face. There was another man with him and they were laughing when Lonnie walked up to the door.

Harvey Beasley looked up, and the crow's-feet around his eyes were crinkled. For a moment they stayed that way, but then they began to crumple and smooth. Harvey Beasley took his feet off his desk.

"Come in. Come in, boy," he said. His voice was deep, but it was quiet now, and his gray eyes were watching—not hard and unfriendly like his stepmother Callie's, or Alvin's—just watching, waiting.

"I—I come to see you," Lonnie said. "I—" But how to say it to those quiet, watching eyes? Callie said it was no use, and all the others agreed with her. They said Harvey Beasley was on Lex Waters's payroll like everyone else, and besides, would Harvey Beasley be like the rest of them? Lonnie wondered. Would he just look at him the way the others did, with the same disgust in his eyes?

Lonnie stood with his eyes fixed on the legs of Harvey Beasley's big desk. The sweat broke out again, but cold this time in the shadowed office with the big steady-humming ceiling fans. The other man got up quickly and said he had to go. He passed Lonnie, and Lonnie did not look at him, but he could see his shoes. They were little and black with pointed shiny toes.

And then he stood there, still watching the legs of the desk until Harvey Beasley said, "Come in, boy. Come on inside." And he moved on up close to the desk.

"What was it you wanted to say?" Harvey Beasley encouraged him. The man's voice was not hard either; it was like his eyes, just quiet.

"Well—" Lonnie began again, and he looked up, thinking he could say it; but he couldn't. How could he say it? But the big-boned man ought to—Harvey Beasley ought to. He was the law, and the law was supposed to do it. A man or a boy, just a plain man or a boy wasn't supposed to do it. The Bible said not to kill.

He was looking down at his feet now, and Harvey Beasley didn't say anything for a long time. Lonnie could feel him sitting there behind the desk, thinking and waiting. But finally he said, "You're young Sullivan, aren't you? Little Lon?"

"Yes, sir," Lonnie said.

"Well," Harvey Beasley said, "I thought I told your stepmama and you too. There's nothing I can do."

Lonnie looked up at him then. "I—" he said, but Harvey Beasley broke in.

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"Sure I know. Lex Waters killed your pa. Most of the county believes that, and most of them will tell you so on the streets. But that's not on the witness stand. That's not sitting up there where Lex Waters can look at them and hear them. And even if they would, even if they would say it, that's not proof. Your daddy was found twenty feet over on Lex Waters's land with his pocketknife open in his hand. And all of us know—everybody in Tucker County knows—that Lon Sullivan never pulled a knife on anybody. And most of us know—you and your stepmama know, because you heard it from his own lips—that your pa had started over to Lex Waters' to accuse him of stealing cows. And maybe that would be evidence enough in some places—I don't know. But I do know it's not enough here, not against a man like Lex Waters. It hasn't been enough for twenty years. Lex Waters has 'business interests'—I think that's what he calls them—in too many farms and homes and businesses for that to be enough—not to speak of being Beat Four's supervisor. Why, there's not twelve men in Tucker County who would even sit on a jury, even if Lex Waters's lawyers would let them, much less get up and testify."

He stopped and looked at Lonnie. Lonnie dropped his eyes.

"And I know you're thinking I could try," Harvey Beasley said, "that I could at least arrest him. I know they've told you I owe my office to him. Well, boy, you can believe that if you want to. I can't help what you or any of them believe. But I know there's no use. If I had a chance, even a little one, I'd do it. But that's the way it is."

And Lonnie looked at him and wanted to say it; he even opened his mouth to say it; but how could he—a boy near-grown, taller even than his daddy had been, and asking like a girl, "What am I going to do?"

But Harvey Beasley must have seen it, and the look came in Harvey Beasley's eyes too, the shadow; not like Callie's, not hard and contemptuous—more like sadness and disappointment, but there just the same. *Like all the rest,* Lonnie thought. *He thinks I'm a coward, too.* The tears started up in his own eyes and he turned, closing them tight.

"Son," Harvey Beasley said, "it's a hard thing, even for a man to do. How old are you? Eighteen?" But it was in his voice too, the flatness and disappointment, and Lonnie did not wait.

"Be careful," Harvey Beasley said, "Don't do it foolishly. Lex Waters is not to be—"

But Lonnie was in the hall, the tears pushing up, a swelling and aching in his throat.

Alvin Tubbs was leaning against a column just outside the door. Red Wilson and the others were standing around him. They were facing the door. When Lonnie stepped out on

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the porch, Alvin pushed himself from the column.

"Well," he said, "if it ain't Lonnie Sullivan. What are you doing here, Lonnie?"

"Hello, Alvin," Lonnie said. He kept his head down and tried to move around Alvin to the steps, but Red Wilson was in the way.

"Why, Alvin!" Red Wilson said. "Haven't you heard? Lonnie's a deputy sheriff now. He believes in law and order."

Alvin and the others laughed.

"Oh, yes," Alvin said. "Seems like I heard that. But I thought he was going to be a preacher. I thought old Brother Moser was gonna ordain him to preach."

"Naw," Red Wilson said. "Not Lonnie. Lonnie likes action, don't you, Lonnie?"

Lonnie had pushed around Red, but the other boys moved in his way. They were laughing harder, and he could feel their eyes on him.

"Go on," he said. "Y'all go on, now. Get out of the way." He pushed at them, but the tears were blinding him, and he could not see them clearly. They kept on laughing.

"Y'all make way," Alvin said. He was behind Lonnie now. "Make way for Harvey Beasley's deputy."

"What did he say, Lonnie?" Harold Tubbs said. "What did ole Harvey say?" Harold was Alvin's brother. He was just eighteen, Lonnie's age, and he wouldn't have said anything if Alvin hadn't been around.

"He told Lonnie he was proud of him," Red Wilson said. "He told him to go keep the peace."

Lonnie had pushed through them, but they were following him, still laughing.

"Hey, Lonnie," Harold Tubbs said, "I saw Lex Waters while ago. He's down at Stevens's feed store. You oughta go arrest *him*."

"Naw," Alvin said. "Lonnie ain't gonna bother Lex Waters. Him and Lex Waters is friends."

Lonnie had reached Dan now, and he groped blindly at the reins, trying to untie them. People were staring at him, not laughing with Alvin and the others, but staring, staring! He got the reins untied and climbed onto the saddle.

"Watch out, folks!" Red Wilson called. "It's wild Lon Sullivan. Y'all better give him room."

Lonnie turned Dan and kicked him gently in the stomach, leaning forward as the horse jumped ahead. Behind him he could hear them laughing, and he knew the people were watching, stopped dead-still all over the square, watching him. He kept his head down stiffly and his eyes on Dan's thick red mane.

He had not decided until he passed Stevens's feed store and saw the yellow-wheeled buggy. Harold Tubbs had been right; Lex Waters was in there. And Lonnie did not exactly decide then; it was just the shame and the anger and all the people staring, and then Waters's buggy black and glistening with its

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bright yellow wheels. He pulled Dan in suddenly and held him prancing there while he tried to decide, sitting there in the rocking, heaving saddle with everyone staring, staring, and the laughing still roaring loud in his head, chasing out everything until he could not think, could not hear even, except the empty silent roaring. And then he turned Dan loose again, leaning forward into the sudden jolting lunge. And it was good to be doing it at last, good to feel the wind rushing and close his eyes and think, *"Faster! Faster!"*—although he did not need to say it because Dan knew it anyway, and it would not be thirty minutes there and back like this, with Dan flattened along the red clay road, his head straight out into the roaring wind, his nostrils, and eyes too, wild and distended . . .

Callie had heard them and she was standing on the porch even before they crossed the bridge—three quick little twin thunders of Dan's front, back, and front feet again. He sawed Dan to a stop in front of the gate and, throwing his leg over the saddle horn, jumped clear. He pushed through the gate and Dan continued around the fence to the watering trough at the back of the house.

Callie was looking at him, but he brushed by her. She had been one of them too. She was his stepmother, but she was not like his father. She had thought it, too, like the others. Every morning since the funeral she had stood and watched him, thinking it, until his mouth would go dry and he couldn't eat. And now her quick black eyes were startled and curious and she wanted to ask him, but he would not look at her. He went back to the big bedroom, hers and his father's room.

The pistol lay large and cold and clean-lined under a stack of white handkerchiefs, like a rattlesnake with a quiet, deadly life of its own. He hesitated just a moment, his hand recoiling involuntarily; then he lifted it out—his father's pistol, heavy and unfamiliar in his hand, never used, to his knowledge, except the time his father had let him try to shoot it.

He held it a moment, across his two hands, feeling the tiny twisting sickness in his stomach. Then Callie spoke from behind him. Her voice was a tight whisper.

"You're going to do it. Lonnie, you're going to do it."

He had forgotten her and he glanced quickly around. Her skin was strained tight over her high cheekbones and under its sun-leathered surface it was pale, as though no blood could get to it. Her small dark eyes were black and glistening.

He turned quickly away from her, back to the pistol. He shoved the cylinder out mechanically and opened a box of cartridges.

Callie came up beside him. "Here," she whispered, "I'll help you." Her hands were trembling, and he jerked the cartridge box away from her.

"Where?" she said. "Where is he

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now, Lonnie? Is he by hisself?"

But he turned his back on her. He took out six cartridges and pushed the drawer shut. He went quickly out into the hall, but she followed him.

"Where is he, Lonnie?" she said.

"Nowhere!" he said. "Go on now, and leave me alone."

He crossed the back porch and went down the steps toward the watering trough. She followed and stood beside Dan while he got on.

"Be careful, Lonnie," she said. "Don't let anybody see it. Wait till he's all by hisself."

He whirled Dan and put his heels to the stomach, but he had dropped one of the cartridges, and he pulled the little horse back.

Callie stooped quickly and picked up the cartridge. She wiped it carefully on her apron and handed it to him. In the light her face was even whiter and the cords stood out in her neck. He met her eyes then, and her lips moved before she spoke.

"Lonnie," she said. "I'm proud. I knew you would do it. And they'll all be proud of you, Lonnie. Don't be afraid."

But the sickness was growing inside him, and he had to hurry. He turned Dan again and urged him into a gallop.

Lather was on Dan's shoulders and he was blowing when they climbed the hill and swung into main street. Lonnie pulled him down to a trot, but the horse was still excited and he fought the bit, snorting and tossing his head. The people on the board sidewalks stopped to watch them, and some of them were already following before Lonnie and Dan reached the store.

The yellow-wheeled buggy was still in front of the feed store, and Lonnie pulled Dan in beside it. His fingers were cold now and his legs trembled as he swung stiffly out of the saddle. He started to tie Dan, but his hands fumbled clumsily, and he gave it up. He could not stop now; he had to hurry. His whole body was beginning to shake.

Wrapping the reins twice around the rail, he went up the steps to the porch of the store. People were coming down from the square now, and he heard someone ask, "What is it? A fight?" And someone said, "It's Lonnie Sullivan. He's looking for Lex Waters."

Lonnie opened the screen door and stepped inside the dark feed store. Mr. M. L. Stevens was hurrying up from the back.

"Yes *sir!*" he said, before he recognized Lonnie. Then he stopped and looked at him. M. L. was nearly bald, and he combed one strand of hair in a curve across his wide white forehead.

"What is it, boy?" he said. His blue eyes were very round. "What do you want?"

Lonnie did not have the pistol in his hand, but it was sticking out of his hip pocket, and his hand kept going back to it, trying to hide it.

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"Where's Mr. Waters?" he asked M. L. His voice was too high and it shook.

M. L. was watching his hand. "I don't know," he said. "He's not here. He left here a good while ago."

For a moment it didn't register on Lonnie. He had not expected this. He had thought all the way in how he would do it, how Lex Waters would be sitting in one of the chairs at the back of the store, and how he would go straight back and do it, before he could get afraid. And now Lex Waters was gone, probably uptown somewhere, on the square, with all the people. Lonnie turned slowly, without answering M. L., and started for the door. The people were pressed around it, and they began to move back. Lonnie saw Alvin Tubbs and Red Wilson at the back of the group. Their faces were white and they were watching him silently.

Lonnie stepped out on the porch, and he tried not to look at the people. His face felt strange and stiff, and he had to clamp his lips tight to keep them from trembling.

Somebody said, "He's up at Holloman's, Lonnie. I seen him go in there."

The crowd parted and made a lane at the steps. Lonnie went down slowly, trying to keep the pistol from swinging. The sickness was coming up again and his legs were wooden and jerking. He started across the wide street, angling toward Holloman's Dry Goods on the square. He moved mechanically now, seeing the people, the courthouse, the nearly empty square as a bright unsteady blur.

And then he heard the voice, faint and fuzzily distant behind him. "There he is!" And at the same time he saw Waters, saw the white shirtfront, broad and protruding between the black unbuttoned coat, and the wide high-crowned gray stetson above the smooth fat face. Lex Waters came around the corner and stepped down into the street. He stopped there, just one step from the sidewalk, and stood looking at him. He did not move.

Lonnie had lost control of his legs now, but they continued to move him forward. He felt the sweat cold on his forehead and upper lip, and his fingers on the pistol were weak.

Gradually Lex Waters's face came clearer above the broad white blur of his shirtfront. It was a pale face, plump and smoothly unlined; and it seemed almost to be smiling, but it never did. The large thickly lashed eyes were smoke-colored, and they too seemed about to smile; but they were watchful too. Cool and unhurried, they moved steadily over Lonnie and over the crowd behind him.

And Lonnie's legs kept carrying him forward, numb and jerking, moving of their own accord, until at last he was before the huge face, hardly five feet from it, and he had to do it; he could not simply stand there or wait any longer with everyone watching. But he did stand there, with the sickness growing in

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his mouth, drying it and thickening his tongue, and with Lex Waters's pale face dancing weirdly before him. And finally Lex Waters smiled and two lines broke the smoothness at the sides of his mouth.

"What's the matter, boy?" he said, and his voice was smooth too. "What's the matter with you?"

The trembling was worse then, shaking Lonnie's whole body. He licked his lips, trying to breathe in the bright soundless blur.

"You're just upset," Lex Waters went on. The smoky eyes smiled slowly, and he started moving forward. "You've just got excited," the smooth lips said; and the round face grew larger above the white blur of the shirt.

Lonnie drew the pistol, forced his fingers to close on the heavy handle and pull it out.

"No," he said, backing away. "Stop now. Stop now." But the face came steadily forward, smiling gently under the gray stetson, and the smooth lips moved slowly, saying, "Now, now. Put that thing up. You couldn't kill a man. You don't want to kill a man."

Lonnie stopped, his tears in the blur now too. He stopped and forced the pistol up before him, held it there shaking with his whole quivering body, and thought, *Now! Now!* To squeeze, even blindly, would do it, with the face hanging huge and fat and smiling just above him. But he also thought, or saw, or heard the quick ripping blast and thud, and the spattered blood and reddened hole in the smooth white face. And he had to do it, not only because of his father and all the people watching, expecting it, not only because of the disgrace and humiliation of failure, but because he had started it now, had threatened Lex Waters, affronted him before the whole town; and if he didn't do it now, didn't make good his one chance . . . Even smiling, Lex Waters's smoky eyes left no doubt at all of the rest.

And still the round face came steadily on, smoothly smiling and watching too, until Lonnie could stand it no longer, backing now into the people behind him. He threw the pistol down, threw it blindly as he turned and bolted through the crowd, fighting the tears and the sobs, until he was back on Dan and away from the silent, staring faces . . .

It was late in the night when Dan took him home. He did not remember where they had been. He had kept Dan off the roads and paths, as far back as possible in the woods; that was all he tried to do.

He did not even know they were coming to the house until the familiar hollow sound of Dan's hoofs on the bridge roused him. He sat up then and started to turn Dan around, but after a moment he realized there was no use. He had to come home sometime; he could not just keep riding. Besides he was tired, and Dan had not been fed.

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The house was dark when he entered, and he felt a momentary relief that he would not have to face Callie that night. But then another thought struck him, cold and heavily sickening. Had Callie decided to leave? She would have heard by now about what had happened that afternoon. Had she been so disgusted with him that she had gone back to her father's? Because she had never failed to wake up when someone rode over the bridge, and if she was there, and awake, she would have had a lamp lighted, would be there on the back porch, waiting to question him.

He went through the kitchen and out onto the dog trot. He called softly, but there was no answer. He went to the big bedroom and fumbled on the bedside table until he found a match. In the flickering yellow flame he saw the big bed neatly made. It was true: Callie was gone.

Numbly he shook out the match and went out of the bedroom. He could not blame Callie. The whole town, practically the whole county, had seen it. He could hear them talking about it now, and laughing. But once more the hopeless confusion swept over him, and he tried desperately to put it out of his mind. He was tired. He would sleep. He would not think about it any more.

He went into his own room, groping in the darkness. He lighted a lamp and turned back the covers of his bed. Then he sat down heavily on the side of the bed and began to untie his shoes.

He had one shoe off and the other untied when the smooth level voice spoke from the doorway. "Don't take them off."

For a moment he did not raise his head, feeling the cold tingling panic spreading through his arms and legs. He stared at his hands, still holding the shoelaces, and he thought, *It can't be. It can't be. Not here. Not in our own house, with Callie*—but then he stopped. Callie wasn't there. She had gone to her father's—or maybe she *hadn't* gone to her father's. Maybe—

He looked up suddenly at the smooth plump face.

"Where's Callie?" he said. "What have you done to Callie?"

"Your stepmama left several hours ago," the smooth voice said. "I expect she was scared when you didn't come home. I'll have to remember to thank her. It makes things much easier."

So she *had* gone. And they were alone. Lonnie sat motionless, half expecting the panic to come again. In Lex Waters's soft white right hand there was a pistol, and the big smoky eyes were not even trying now to smile. But the panic did not come; after the first tingling shock it went away and there was only a numbness and a flat, heavy weariness.

So he sat and stared at the smooth pale face, wondering dazedly at his own calm. He told himself that Lex Waters meant to kill him, would surely kill him; that in a matter of moments, perhaps, the flat-heavy pis-

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tol would roar sharply, bucking up in the smooth pale hand, and he would feel the bullet hot and ripping in his flesh. But still there was the calm and the eerie, detached voice somewhere inside him, saying, *So this is all, so this is all there is to it.* Because it somehow did not matter; somehow nothing mattered. He would be shot and he would no longer be Lonnie Sullivan, no longer be anything—and he did not care.

So he sat there until Lex Waters motioned with the gun, taking a half step toward him. "All right," he said. "Put your other shoe on. We're going for a walk."

Lonnie almost smiled as he understood. Of course. A walk. Lex Waters would not want to do it here. He would want to make it look like an accident or like self-defense. But not this time. It wouldn't happen that way this time. Slowly Lonnie slipped his second shoe off.

Lex Waters cursed him softly. "Put them on," he said. "Put them back on!"

Lonnie stood up. "No, sir," he said. "I don't need them." He started slowly forward.

Lex Waters's smoky eyes widened suddenly. He cocked the pistol. "Boy," he said, "put those shoes on. I said put those shoes on."

"I heard you," Lonnie said. "I don't need them. Mr. Waters," he said, "you killed my father."

Lex Waters snorted. "He was a fool," he said. "He killed himself."

"He was an honest man," Lonnie said, "and you killed him. You killed him with that pistol."

"He was a fool," Lex Waters repeated. "He wouldn't listen to reason."

"But you killed him," Lonnie said. "You shot him through the head with that pistol."

He was close now. A few more steps.

"I'll kill you too," Lex Waters said. "I'll kill you too if you take another step."

"Yes, sir," Lonnie said. "You might." He stopped then, scarcely an arm's length from the pistol, and stared at it. "You might," he said again, thinking, *One lunge will be enough if I do it right.* "You might," he said, tensing his legs under him, feeling his arms large and wooden at his side. "You might," he said, whipping one arm out suddenly and ducking his head under the deafening roar of the pistol. "You might," he said, closing his eyes and charging with his head at the broad protruding belly, "and then again you mightn't!"

Lex Waters's breath went out in a quick sigh. His head hit the doorjamb and the pistol fell skidding across the hall. Lonnie caught it before it stopped, caught it and turned, cocking it in both hands.

"Because I might kill you," he heard his voice saying, and it did not sound like his voice at all—too shrill, rising hysterically, "because I'm going to kill you, Mr. Waters, with this pistol, with this same pis-

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tol." But at the same time another voice, a deeper voice, was calling, "That's enough, son. Stop it. That's enough." And Lonnie did not know where it was coming from, was hardly hearing it really, holding the pistol in Lex Waters's face, trying to force his finger to squeeze out the roaring, splattering blast, hearing his voice high and tight as though it was trying to squeeze the trigger itself, saying, "Kill you! *Kill you! KILL YOU!*"

Until Harvey Beasley's hand closed suddenly over his wrist, and Callie was there too, pulling at him, smothering his face against her so that his strange shrieking voice came to him choked and muffled and finally not as a voice at all, but only a dry, sobbing sound.

And there were others there too. From the bed where Callie and Harvey Beasley held him he could see them, more than half a dozen, standing over Lex Waters.

And he tried to tell Harvey Beasley and Callie to let him up, that he had not done it yet, but they held him.

"You've done enough," Harvey Beasley said. "You've done all you need to."

But it was not until much later, after he had been to sleep and was awake again without their knowing it, that he understood.

Callie and Harvey Beasley were sitting by his bed; the others had gone, he guessed.

"And you were there all the time?" Callie said. "Even before I went looking for you?"

"We followed him from the minute Lonnie made his play this afternoon," Harvey Beasley said. "I knew it wouldn't be long until he went after Lonnie."

"He must have been waiting across the road ever since dark," Callie said. "That's where he was when I saw him."

They were silent a moment, and Lonnie felt himself drifting off again.

"And do you really think he can be convicted?" Callie said.

"With that statement before the eight of us?" Harvey Beasley said. "And the way those men feel about it now? It's open and shut."

Lonnie didn't listen any more. He was tired and very, very sleepy.

NEXT MONTH . . .

THOMAS WALSH'S *Cop on the Prowl*

ROBERT BLOCH'S *Sock Finish*

AGATHA CHRISTIE'S *Once a Thief*

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EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR: **NICHOLSON WILLIAMS**

TITLE: ***A Way With Women***

TYPE: Detective Story à la **Black Mask**

DETECTIVE: Dev Bacon of the Bunco Squad

LOCALES: San Diego, California, and San Felipe, Mexico

TIME: The Present

COMMENTS: *The Mexican, smooth and attractive, had taken the hard-working waitress for her life's savings—$1000. Dev found he had more than a professional interest in the case.*

HE WALKED INTO THE CROWDED, rowdy bar and pushed himself into a corner where he could avoid the sailors getting liquored up in preparation for their trip to Tijuana after dark. There were old sailors and young sailors, a few girls who seemed very young and very old, three wet-shirted bartenders, and perhaps a half dozen waitresses.

He ordered a beer, then showed the bartender a small badge fastened to the flap of his wallet. "You got a waitress here named Enid Slocum?"

The bartender nodded and beckoned to a girl in her late twenties who was leaning in a stall reserved for waitresses. She pushed her tray to one side and moved toward him. She brushed her hair back from her temples with the palms of her hand and the detective suddenly wondered why such an attractive girl worked in a dive like this.

She slid on the stool next to him. "Yes?" she asked.

He pulled out his badge again and showed it to her. "I'm Dev Bacon from the Bunco Squad." He spoke pleasantly, hoping to make a good impression on the girl. "I understand you have a complaint?"

"I called this morning," she said, crossing her thighs. Her limbs were smooth under the white skirt.

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"I thought you had skipped it."

The bartender placed a stein of beer in front of Dev. The white head in the glass foamed over the side and spilled around the base.

"On Monday mornings we have all the weekend complaints to clear up," the detective said. He sipped the beer, then pulled a small notebook from his pocket. "Your name is Enid Slocum?"

She nodded and added an address in Pacific Beach.

"Married?"

"No."

"Okay," he said, writing in the book. "Now tell me what happened."

"I was bilked out of a thousand dollars."

Dev wrote down the figure in his book, wondering where a waitress got so much money.

The girl apparently sensed his curiosity. "Sailors tip well," she said curtly, "and I have always saved my tips."

"I didn't say anything," he replied. "I just want to know what happened."

She lit a cigarette, then picked an invisible tobacco crumb from her tongue. "Last night a Mexican came in around nine. He was about thirty-five, good-looking, and very polite. He took a booth in the rear on my station and ordered a tequila. When he paid for it, he took the money from the largest roll of bills I've ever seen. Some were hundred-dollar bills. I saw them."

Dev sighed. "He told you he had found the money and that if you would put up some dough, he would split the find with you. It's known as the pigeon drop."

The girl shook her head and motioned to the bartender who brought her a glass of beer. "I'm not quite that dumb," she said. "No, he just sat in the booth all by himself and drank tequila. He seemed to remain sober until a few minutes before closing time and then he suddenly became quite drunk." She sipped from her glass.

"So?" the detective prompted.

"Big-hearted me," she continued. "I figured that if I had seen his bankroll, so could others. Some of these sailors, you know, are pretty money hungry."

"Yeah, I know." He watched her blouse pull against the rounded lines of her figure. He wondered again why she worked in a place like the Sailors Bar. She seemed well educated, had a good vocabulary.

"When I saw some sailors still hanging around the front door, I maneuvered him out the back and for the lack of a better place, put him in my car. I went back inside and when I returned after cleanup, he was fast asleep. I didn't know what to do."

"Why didn't you call the cop shack?" Dev asked. "We're set up to take care of things like that." He inhaled the faint odor of her perfume.

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She shrugged. "He seemed so helpless. I finally drove home, thinking he could sleep in the car. He woke up just as I pulled in the parking lot. He apologized, then asked if he could have some coffee." She puffed on her cigarette and Dev sensed she was embarrassed. She lapsed into silence.

Dev waited a moment, then prompted, "I'm listening."

"I propped him up on the couch and made the coffee," she continued, staring ahead.

The detective shook his head and thought the girl was lucky she had lost only her money. Aloud, he said, "So when you returned from the kitchen, the Mexican was gone and so was your piggy bank?"

"No," she said, inhaling her cigarette smoke. "I gave him the money."

"You *gave* it to him?"

"I'll try to explain. After he drank the coffee he sobered up quickly. He was a perfect gentleman . . . he really was. He was the first real gentleman I've met in years." She paused, then added, "His name is Ramon Gomez. He told me he had gone on his drunk because he couldn't buy his *cammerone* boat—that's Mexican for shrimp boat. He said he had been saving to buy a *cammerone* boat for years. In San Felipe, where Ramon lives, there were only two boats for sale because the fishing is so good. Both boats belong to some man who lives up here."

"If he came across the border, we can get his address from customs," Dev interrupted.

Enid colored slightly. "He came across the river."

Dev sighed again. "A wetback," he commented. "Your friend probably never saw San Felipe and probably is back in Los Angeles right now." He sipped his beer. "How did he get the money?"

"I'm coming to that," she said, ignoring his comment. "When he got here, he discovered the boat he really wanted had been sold. The other boat cost eight hundred dollars more than he had. Ramon didn't ask me for the money. I just impulsively wrote out the check and told him we'd buy it together. I don't want to be a waitress all my life. I told him we would be partners, or that I would have a small interest. I thought we could go downtown this morning and have someone draw up legal papers. When I went to bed, I left the check on the coffee table."

"And when you got up this morning, Gomez was gone and so was the check."

She nodded, and again he caught the faint odor of perfume from her hair. "That's about it."

"Why didn't you immediately stop payment on it?"

"I tried to," she said. "It was a few minutes before I realized the check was gone. When I did, I drove down to the bank. Ramon apparently cashed it while I was in

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the car. The cashier said they tried to call me and verify it, but when I didn't answer they went ahead and paid it, because they knew it was my signature."

Dev closed his notebook and put it back in his pocket. "About the only thing you can do is make out some kind of a fraud complaint, but even that will be hard to make stick, I'm afraid."

She nodded unhappily. "That's what the police said when I called them this morning."

The detective felt sorry for her. He turned on his stool and watched her over the rim of his glass. Her skin was smooth, deeply tanned, and the brown contrasted well with her blue eyes. He thought she looked more like a La Jolla debutante than a waitress in the Sailors Bar. Aloud, he said, "Maybe, if I can find him, I can scare him into returning what he hasn't spent. You ought to be careful who you pick up in bars. This guy could have cut your throat."

"I don't pick up people in bars," she said, again coloring slightly. "Besides, even if he is a crook, he's still a gentleman. I just felt sorry for him, that's all." She slipped from the stool, turned, and walked away. She walked gracefully, like an actress.

Dev watched her until she disappeared behind a door marked *For Employees Only*.

The bartender mopped the counter. "Another?" he asked.

Dev shook his head.

The bartender flicked ashes from his cigar into the sink. "Enid's a real character," he said. "She's always a sucker for anyone with a sob story."

Dev shrugged and returned to headquarters.

Later, after he had finished typing his daily report, he thought about the case. Gomez had not conned her out of the money. Apparently he had not even asked for it, although it was obvious he had put the idea in her head. Legally, Enid didn't have a leg to stand on. He smiled as he remembered the slim, nylon-sheathed legs.

He pushed the button on the intercom, asked for Records, then requested a check on the name Ramon Gomez. There was a Ray Gomez, wanted on a Spanish Prisoner swindle complaint. Los Angeles wanted a Rafael Gomez for assault and battery—Rafael preyed on women after gaining their sympathy. The descriptions on the two fugitives was similar. He went into Auto Theft detail and asked Manuel, a Mexican detective, to check on any Ramon Gomez in San Felipe.

Dev ate dinner in a café, went to a movie, then home to bed. He could not shake the attractive Enid from his mind.

Early the following afternoon, Dev returned to the Sailors Bar and asked for her.

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"Tuesdays and Wednesdays she's off," the bartender said.

He drove out to her home and found she lived in a small cottage on the beach. There were approximately a dozen units, in a cluster facing a seawall. The chimes from the door button rang lazily inside the apartment, but no one answered. Disappointed, he turned to go, when a young girl came out of the house next door.

The girl looked at him curiously, then said, "If you're looking for the woman who lives there, she's on the beach. She's always on the beach."

He climbed over the seawall and almost stepped on Enid. She lay on her back, garbed in a brief two-piece swim suit, one arm flung across her eyes to shield them from the glare of the sun. He caught his breath. Never, he thought, had he seen a more perfectly molded woman.

She seemed to sense his stare and lifted her arm from her eyes. When she recognized him, she sat up abruptly, adjusting the top part of her suit. "Did you find him?" she asked.

He shook his head and sat down cross-legged on the edge of her blanket. "We have a lead. He may be a *pachuco* from Los Angeles, a real no-good. I want to get a better description."

Enid brushed the sand from her long, tanned limbs. "He was about thirty-five, olive skin, black hair with a slight wave. He had a mustache, about five-ten, broad shoulders, thin hips." She smiled slightly. "He had the build of a bull fighter."

Dev grinned. "You have just described fifty thousand Mexicans."

She hugged her knees and looked out over the ocean. "He was very good-looking." She paused, then added, "I think I'll go down to Logan Avenue tonight and see if I can find anyone in the Mexican community who knows him."

"Don't," Dev replied curtly. "That's no place for a girl like you to be roaming."

She laughed, teeth white against her lipstick. "Really," she said, "I've eaten there many times."

"There's a big difference between eating there and making inquiries about a con man. Besides, if this Gomez is the man we think he is, he's dangerous." He told her about the man wanted in Los Angeles, then added, "You leave the police work up to me."

"But," she protested, "if I don't have any grounds for a complaint, why are you investigating it?"

"It's not official," he replied slowly. "I'm doing it on my own because I hate to see a girl like you get taken, that's all."

She looked at him curiously for a moment, tipping her head so that her long hair fell over her shoulder. Then she smiled affectionately and placed her hand on his arm. "You

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are very nice, Dev," she said softly.

He liked the way his name sounded on her lips. "Tomorrow, if you're here, I'll bring my bathing suit."

"I'll be here," she promised.

He drove back to the office highly elated. The old phrase of spring and a young man's fancy kept turning over in his mind and the thought occurred to him that he should feel grateful to the elusive Gomez for having provided the introduction.

He called Los Angeles and asked for more information on their assault-and-battery fugitive. The description was close. Rafael Gomez picked up women in bars and after gaining their sympathy accompanied them to their homes. On one occasion, a woman had left the room briefly and returned to find Gomez going through her purse. When she screamed, he had beaten her so severely she had not been expected to survive. Gomez was believed to have fled to Mexico.

Dev hung up and pursed his lips as he painted a mental picture of Enid, swathed in bandages, lying in pain on a hospital cot.

The next morning, when Dev left his rooming house, he carried his swimming trunks. He ran through his routine check of the city's pawnshops with little more than a passing glance at the records, and a few minutes after noon he was on the beach. He found Enid in the same spot.

She smiled warmly. "You can change in my apartment, Dev," she said.

The afternoon sped by. A beach, he thought, was probably the most romantic spot a person could find in the daytime. It was impossible to be with a woman in the surf, or lie beside her on a blanket under the warm sun without feeling a certain degree of intimacy. Once Enid went to the apartment and returned with cold beer and sandwiches. The filling was Mexican, exceptionally tasty, and he asked where she had bought it.

Her eyes followed a seagull wheeling over the breaking waves. "I had dinner on Logan Avenue last night," she said slowly. "I bought it in the restaurant."

He suddenly became worried. "Did you tell anyone you were looking for Gomez?"

She took his hand in hers. "It's all right, Dev. I just mentioned it to a few people I know," she said reassuringly. "I go there often to practice my Spanish. It's perfectly safe."

He sighed, trying to hide his exasperation. "You can get killed down there." He spaced his words evenly to give them added emphasis. "If Gomez is hiding in Mex Town and word gets to him you've gone to the police, there's no telling what he will do." He described luridly the Gomez assault in Los Angeles.

She was silent for a while after

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he finished talking, then said, "Ramon didn't strike me as being that sort of man. There were other valuables in the house he could have taken. He was a gentleman."

Dev shook his head slowly. "Con men never appear to be con men," he explained. "If they did, they wouldn't be able even to bilk a schoolgirl. Don't forget, this character has a way with women. If he didn't you'd still have your thousand bucks."

She looked up at him with troubled eyes. She seemed so helpless, so lovable, he couldn't resist an impulse to bend over and kiss her. His lips rested on hers only a brief second before she rolled away and jumped to her feet. "You are really very, very nice, Dev," she said, brushing her hair from her temples. Then she turned abruptly and ran toward the stairs in the seawall. He grinned foolishly, picked up the blanket, and followed her to the apartment.

Inside, he heard a shower running somewhere behind the closed bedroom door. He leaned in the doorway, looking out at the ocean, wondering how much a really nice engagement ring would cost.

After a while Enid came out of the bedroom. She was dressed in her waitress uniform.

"I thought you were off Wednesdays," Dev protested, disappointed.

"One of the girls is sick and asked me to fill in," she replied, resting her hand on his forearm.

He tried to kiss her again, but she gracefully eluded him and ran across the parking lot. She slipped into an old convertible coupé. "Pull the door shut when you leave," she called. She waved and drove away.

He smiled happily again. She must trust him completely if she would drive off and leave him alone in her apartment.

Dev found a note on his desk the following morning ordering him to report to the Chief of Detectives and he wondered if his unauthorized absence the previous afternoon had been detected.

"They picked up that bank embezzler, in Orlando, Florida," the captain told him a few minutes later. "We want to get him out before he decides to fight extradition. Catch the next plane."

"I'm working on this Gomez thing," Dev stammered.

The captain was not interested. "It can wait. The plane won't and it leaves in an hour."

A week ago, Dev had been crying for a trip. Now, he thought resentfully, when he didn't want to leave, he was sent out of town. If he didn't need the job so badly right now, he would quit. He tried to call Enid on the phone, but there was no answer. He visualized her lying on the sand, the white crystals sticking to her long, slender legs. He swore softly as he hung up. There wasn't even time to drive out and say goodbye.

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By the time Dev reached Florida, the embezzler had decided to fight extradition and Dev was ordered to wait until the necessary papers had been signed. He wrote to Enid in care of the Sailors Bar, but received no answer. Five weeks elapsed before he returned to San Diego.

As soon as he had delivered his prisoner to the jail, Dev drove to the Sailors Bar. The place was jammed, but he could see no sign of Enid. He wedged his way into a corner and asked the bartender why she was not working.

"She quit," the bartender said.

"Quit?" Dev echoed. "When?"

"What's it to you?" The bartender started to move away.

Dev pulled out his badge and forced the man's attention.

"About a week ago," the bartender replied. "Is she wanted?"

"Why did she quit?"

The bartender shrugged. "I don't know. I never ask any questions."

"She must have given you some reason." The bartender irritated him.

The apron-clad man stared at him for a moment before leaning on the bar. Then he said, "They never give any reason, pal. Sometimes they work a week, sometimes they work a month, but it makes no difference when they quit. They always quit the same way. They just don't show up for work. Sometimes it's because they're lushes. Other times, they got man trouble. But always when they quit, they don't give no notice. They just don't show up for work."

Dev gripped the railing and when he spoke his voice was brittle. "Are you telling me that when Enid didn't show up to work, you didn't even notify the authorities?"

The bartender sighed. "If you think all I got to do is call the cops when one of my waitresses doesn't show, you got another think, my friend." He walked away and started to draw beer for the waitresses lined up in the service stall.

For a moment, Dev sought furiously for a reason to arrest the arrogant bartender. Then a picture of Enid, trussed in traction in some hospital, flashed through his mind. He ran from the bar and drove as fast as he dared to Pacific Beach.

The first thing he noticed when he swung into the parking lot was Enid's small convertible and he breathed a slow sigh of relief. He parked in front of her unit, climbed out, and pushed the doorbell. Chimes rang lazily inside, unheeded, and he recalled his first visit. He walked to the seawall and looked down on the sand. A strange couple occupied the spot Enid liked. He saw no sign of her on the beach.

He went back to her apartment and peered in the window. The unit had not been vacated. A dirty ashtray was on the coffee table. A coffee pot, half full, was visible on the stove. He walked around the

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building to the rear entrance. Resting on the small porch were a half dozen bottles of milk and an equal number of rolled newspapers.

He ran to the front of the cottages and searched until he found an apartment with a manager's sign above the doorbell. A woman in her early sixties answered.

"We don't buy anything at all, young man," she said, starting to close the door.

"Police," Dev snapped, showing his badge. "I'm inquiring about Miss Slocum."

"My word," said the landlady, opening the door wide. "What did she do?"

"We think she's missing."

The woman nodded toward the parking lot. "That's her car."

"We're looking for her, not her car. When's the last time you saw her?"

The landlady put her finger against her nose and looked thoughtful. "The day she let the water run over in the set tubs in the laundry—about ten days back."

"I want to look through her apartment," he said angrily. "Didn't it occur to you to report her missing?"

The woman reached behind the door and picked up a single key on a hoop. "I see my tenants on the first day of the month when the rent is due," she said, tight-lipped, "unless they let the water run over in the laundry."

Enid's apartment looked the same as on his first visit. A waitress uniform lay crumpled on the bed as if tossed there moments earlier. Dev returned to the living room where the landlady watched him sullenly. A cigar butt, resting in an ashtray full of cigarette stubs, caught his eye. He bent over it, then caught his breath. Several of the stubs were of lined paper common to Mexican cigarettes, and on one, the brand name, Elegante, was clearly visible.

Wheeling, he strode out of the door and punched the bell of the adjoining apartment. It opened immediately and the young girl he had seen on his first visit pushed out her head.

Dev showed his badge. "When's the last time you heard any activity next door?"

The girl stared at him wide-eyed, frightened by his tone. "Last Friday night," she faltered. "When I came home from a show."

An older woman appeared behind the girl and glanced at the badge still in Dev's hand. "I knew there was something wrong," she said. "There were two Mexicans parked in front of her house for a long time Friday night. Evil-looking creatures they were. I told my husband we should call the police, but he told me to mind my own business."

"Can you describe them?" Dev said impatiently.

"I certainly can," the woman replied. "They were in a yellow car,

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a new one. The man driving was fat and greasy and smoked a cigar. The other man was skinny, with a mustache. They were still there after I went to bed. I could hear the radio in the car playing."

"How would you like it if someone was staked out on you and your neighbors wouldn't call the cops?" Dev snapped.

"My husband . . ." The woman's voice trailed off.

The landlady pulled the door shut to Enid's apartment. "You wait there," Dev called to her. "There will be some detectives out to dust the place in a few minutes."

He slid in his car and drove furiously back to headquarters.

He had little doubt as to what had happened. Either the psychopathic Gomez had found out she had gone to the police, or else he had come back thinking he could con her out of more money. Maybe Gomez and his henchman had kidnaped her, hoping to force her into writing more checks. He vowed to find Gomez if it took him the rest of his life.

Manuel was still at his desk when Dev burst into the Auto Theft office. He quickly outlined what had happened and Manuel picked up the phone. "I'll work on my contacts in the south, amigo," he promised.

Next, Dev repeated his story to the captain who now showed an acute interest in the case. Within minutes, an all-points alarm was broadcast for Rafael Gomez, alias Ramon Gomez. A fingerprint squad was sent to her apartment in Pacific Beach. The Mexican police were alerted officially.

A few minutes later Manuel came into the room with a happy expression on his face. "My friend in Mexicali has been waiting for me to call," he said. "There is a Ramon Gomez in San Felipe who has suddenly become wealthy. My friend says Gomez is not telling anyone where he got his new money. This he found out a month ago, but when we did not call him back he did not do anything more."

"Call San Felipe," the captain said briskly.

"My friend, he is doing that. He said if we would fly to the beach just north of the village he would have a detachment of police meet us."

The captain nodded. "You know where to rent the plane," he said.

San Felipe appeared incredibly small from the air. A T-shaped dock jutted out into the water from the center of the town and more than a hundred boats were tied to the dock. They bobbed gently on the waves. Their shiny paint caught the rays of the late afternoon sun and tossed tiny sparks of light back into the sky.

"Fishing boats," Manuel said. "All they do in San Felipe is fish."

Dev nodded and fastened his safety belt as the pilot dropped the

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plane toward a strip of smooth sand about a mile north of the dock. "Our friends are here," Dev replied, pointing to two black cars waiting on the beach.

A few minutes later he was speeding toward the village in one of the cars.

"There is a big yellow Mercury from California parked at the entrance to the dock," the driver said, narrowly missing an Indian on a burro. "We have checked the numbers with your headquarters. It belongs to a man in Point Loma named Guillermo Cavanero."

Dev grimly patted the revolver in his shoulder holster. "Any sign of a girl?"

The driver shrugged. "We have a man who is looking around. He will meet us at the dock and tell us what he has found, good?"

The man leaning on the fender of Cavanero's car seemed more like a fisherman than a detective. When the police car pulled to a stop beside him, he pushed his head in the open window.

"The man from the big yellow car and Gomez, they are aboard the *Buena Suerta* which is the seventh boat from the far end of the pier," he said slowly. "The boat, she has been gone for a week and came back only two or three hours ago." He chuckled as if time did not matter. "These fishermen, they do not like strangers. I know only that this boat left San Felipe with the rising sun last week and just now it has come back with no fish, no nothing."

Dev jumped out of the car, took out his revolver, and released the safety. He looked at the driver and Manuel, who both shrugged slightly, then joined him. Presently they all started for the dock. The police remained in the other car.

The sections of the dock tipped crazily under the weight of four men. One section sank low enough to allow water to slosh on Dev's sports shoes.

They moved silently. The *Buena Suerta* was larger than the other boats around it. Its hull had recently been painted a glistening white and the decks shone in the late sun. Amidships was a control panel and next to the wheel was a door which led below. Dev saw no portholes, but frosted glass hatches in the center of the foredeck were propped open slightly to provide ventilation. He heard a subdued murmur of voices, then someone laughed loudly. He smiled, thin-lipped, and gripped the butt of his revolver tightly.

The two Mexican detectives jumped lightly onto the stern of the boat. Their weight made the vessel roll slightly and the murmur of conversation ceased abruptly. One of the detectives motioned to Manuel and Dev to remain on the dock.

A voice called out from below. *"Quien es?"* It was startlingly clear in the silence. "Who is it?"

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The detectives poised themselves. *"La policia,"* one replied softly. "You will please come out with your hands up."

The murmur suddenly resumed. "Immediately, you must come," the detective called more harshly.

There was a moment's tense silence, then a shadow darkened the companionway. A man in his late thirties stepped out on the deck. His black hair waved slightly and a full mustache adorned his upper lip.

"Señor Gomez?"

The man looked frightened and nodded.

The other detective ran his hands over Gomez's body, then spun him around and handcuffed his hands behind him. Gomez said nothing. He's yellow, Dev thought. Punks are always yellow. Dev jumped on the boat.

The detective called out again. "You must come up also, Senor Cavanero."

The fat man came up snorting, like a bull entering an arena. "What is the meaning of this outrage?" he flared angrily. He looked as if he were going to swing and Dev stepped forward. He stopped abruptly as he saw another shadow fall across the companionway. "Look out!" he cried. "There's another one."

The Mexican detective wheeled and pointed his gun toward the door. Dev instinctively stepped back. His wet crepe soles skidded on the deck and he fell to one knee. He started to get up, then froze. Enid stepped out on the deck.

His heart went out to her as he saw how she was trembling. She wore brief shorts and a halter, and her long hair, disheveled, shimmered in the sunlight.

Dev muttered a brief, fervent prayer, thanking God she was safe. He straightened up. "You poor kid," he said tenderly, moving toward her.

She stared at him, then slow recognition came into her eyes. The strain apparently had been too much. She opened her mouth, but was unable to say anything. Then she buried her face in her hands and leaned back against the control panel. Her shoulders shook with emotion.

"You poor kid," Dev repeated, going to her. "Everything's all right now. The marines have landed."

Cavanero suddenly grunted inarticulately and Gomez spoke rapidly in an undertone to the detective who was guarding him.

Dev flung his arm around Enid and tried to pull her toward him, but she suddenly twisted away. "Dev," she gasped, "you don't understand." Words failed her again. She held out her arm and pointed to a wide, gold band on the fourth finger of her left hand.

Behind him Cavanero guffawed, then everyone was chuckling, even Manuel. Dev looked around him bewilderedly, then turned back to

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Enid who now was brushing tears of laughter from her eyes with the palms of her hands.

"I'm so sorry, Dev," she said, and broke out into a new paroxysm of laughter, giving the lie to her words.

Dev turned abruptly and walked alone off the boat, his face burning. The laughter on the boat followed him back to the car, where he waited for Manuel.

"It was this way," Manuel said later as they were flying back to San Diego. "Gomez took the money, went to Cavanero, and bought the boat. He listed the girl as half owner. On his first trip out he hit the jackpot and he went back to San Diego to give her the cut. Cavanero drives him out to her house. She gets so excited she wants to see the boat right away and they talk Cavanero into driving them down. They all go on a cruise across the gulf to Guaymas and by that time she and Gomez decide they are in love and might as well own the boat as husband and wife. They get married in Guaymas."

Dev took a drag on his cigarette. "I should have pinched him for L.A."

Manuel shook his head. "Gomez never saw L.A." He chuckled. "They're coming up today to close her apartment. She says she wants to see you and explain."

"Aw, shut up," Dev said.

"Do not be angry, my friend," Manuel replied good-naturedly. He chuckled again. "You were right in one way."

"How's that?"

"You told me Gomez must have a way with women."

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Daniel Webster (1782–1852) was a famous American statesman, lawyer, and orator. He served in Congress as the spokesman of New England merchants and shipowners; he was a United States senator for fourteen years, and then a member of the cabinets of Presidents Harrison, Tyler, and Fillmore. Perhaps the foremost orator in American history, Daniel Webster was also a legend-maker of epic proportions: his reputation as a drinker, eater, and rugged individualist was Gargantuan . . . Now, what did this brilliant lawyer and politician think of murder and the detection thereof? We have discovered an "unknown" piece by the great Daniel Webster in an obscure anthology titled THE BOSTON BOOK. BEING SPECIMENS OF METROPOLITAN LITERATURE, *published in 1850 by Ticknor, Reed, and Fields of Boston. This volume is a treasure trove of New England writing — it contains the work of, among others, Oliver Wendell Holmes, Nathaniel Hawthorne, James Russell Lowell, John Greenleaf Whittier, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, Richard Henry Dana, Jr., and Ralph Waldo Emerson; but it is Daniel Webster's contribution which has criminological interest. Short as it is, you will find in it the florid style, the grandiloquence, of the period— and the deep, religious conscience of Nineteenth Century New England.*

THE FATAL SECRET

by DANIEL WEBSTER

AN AGED MAN, WITHOUT AN ENEMY in the world, in his own house and in his own bed, is made the victim of a butcherly murder, for mere pay.

Deep sleep had fallen on the destined victim and on all beneath his roof. A healthful old man, to whom sleep was sweet, the first sound slumbers of the night held him in their soft but strong embrace. The assassin enters, through the window already prepared, into an unoccupied apartment. With noiseless foot he paces the lonely hall, half lighted by the moon; he winds up the ascent of the stairs, and reaches the door of the chamber. Of this, he moves the lock, by soft and continued pressure, till it turns on its hinges without noise; and he enters, and beholds his victim before him.

The room was uncommonly open to the admission of light. The face of the innocent sleeper was turned from the murderer, and the beams of the moon, resting on the gray locks of his aged temple, showed him where to strike.

The fatal blow is given! and the victim passes, without a struggle or a

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motion, from the repose of sleep to the repose of death!

It is the assassin's purpose to make sure work; and he yet plies the dagger, though it was obvious that life had been destroyed by the blow of the bludgeon. He even raises the aged arm, that he may not fail in his aim at the heart, and replaces it again over the wounds of the poniard. To finish the picture, he explores the wrist for the pulse. He feels for it, and ascertains that it beats no longer.

It is accomplished. The deed is done. He retreats, retraces his steps to the window, passes out through it as he came in, and escapes. He has done the murder — no eye has seen him, no ear has heard him. The *secret* is his own, and it is safe!

Ah! gentlemen, that was a dreadful mistake. Such a secret can be safe nowhere. The whole creation of God has neither nook nor corner where the guilty can bestow it and say it is safe. Not to speak of that eye which glances through all disguises, and beholds everything . . .

True it is, generally speaking, that "murder will out." True it is that Providence hath so ordained, and doth so govern things, that those who break the great law of heaven, by shedding man's blood, seldom succeed in avoiding discovery. Especially, in a case exciting so much attention as this, discovery must come . . .

A thousand eyes turn at once to explore every man, every thing, every circumstance, connected with the time and place; a thousand ears catch every whisper; a thousand excited minds intensely dwell on the scene, shedding all their light, and ready to kindle the slightest circumstance into a blaze of discovery.

Meantime, the guilty soul cannot keep its own secret. It is false to itself; or rather it feels an irresistible impulse of conscience to be true to itself. It labors under its guilty possession, and knows not what to do with it. The human heart was not made for the residence of such an inhabitant. It finds itself preyed on by a torment, which it dares not acknowledge to God or man. A vulture is devouring it, and it can ask no sympathy or assistance, either from heaven or earth.

The secret which the murderer possesses soon comes to possess him; and, like the evil spirits of which we read, it overcomes him, and leads him whithersoever it will. He feels it beating at his heart, rising to his throat, and demanding disclosure. He thinks the whole world sees it in his face, reads it in his eyes, and almost hears its workings in the very silence of his thoughts. It has become his master. It betrays discretion, it breaks down his courage, it conquers his prudence.

When suspicions, from without, begin to embarrass him, and the net of circumstance to entangle him, the fatal *secret* struggles with still greater violence to burst forth. It must be confessed, *it will be* confessed, there is no refuge from confession but suicide, and suicide is confession.

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EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR: **A. HARRIS**

TITLE: ***The Last Week***

TYPE: Crime and Detection

LOCALE: Southern Italy

TIME: The Present

COMMENTS: *A typically "Gallic" tale: sophisticated and sad, romantic and gay . . . and for a "first story" remarkably disciplined both in concept and execution. Ah, those French 'tecs!*

TOGETHER THEY RAN UP THREE long steps, across the flagstoned terrace and into the hotel, holding hands tightly and laughing. Inside they slowed to a more sedate pace, deliberately mimicking the permanent residents who lived at the St. Anthony because the warm climate in southern Italy is good for rheumatism. Several sat in the lobby that morning and they looked up as the two passed—vital, energetic, holding hands.

A little fat man, not a permanent guest, was among those who raised their heads. He had been staying at the St. Anthony a week, arriving two days after them, and he always seemed to be where they were. He would pass them early in the morning as they walked along the beach before breakfast. His table in the dining room was just across from theirs. His bedroom was two doors down on the same floor. They were constantly seeing him, constantly aware of his presence.

"Look," she said, "There's that odd little man again."

He let go of her hand. The little fat man broke into a wide smile, aimed directly at them. Almost from his arrival he had never failed to recognize them with a wide, happy expansion of his jaws and a brisk nod of his head.

"There he goes again," she whispered as they walked to the elevator, "grinning at us like an idiot. Let's grin right back at him and see who stops first."

"No." He hesitated in front of the open elevator doors. "You go

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on up and I'll have a talk with him. Maybe he's an acquaintance, somebody I met years ago. You know we never have spoken to him. He might be shy." He was beginning to sound apologetic, as if the matter were important.

"He doesn't look the shy type to me."

"You pretty yourself up," he kissed her lightly, "and meet me down here."

"All right." She stopped halfway in the elevator. "Don't make a friend of him, darling. We don't need anybody."

He waited until the doors shut. A wave of fright and sickness broke loose from the tight hold he was keeping on it, and fanned out across his chest and around his stomach and down his legs. Yet he looked quite unperturbed as he crossed the lobby.

The little fat man, who hadn't taken his eyes off them and who hadn't completely stopped smiling, scrambled to his feet. Now his smile appeared likely to split his mouth at either side as the tall young man with wide shoulders and a gentle face approached.

"Forgive me, but have we by any chance met before?"

"I'm sure we haven't." The little fat man extended his hand, laughing delightedly. "But it's entirely possible we may have. I have no memory for faces, Mr.—?"

"Dalembert." He took the other's hand.

"Da—lem—bert," the little man rolled out the word syllable by syllable. "Let me see. I have a business associate named D'embert but I know you're not he. One's memory isn't that bad." He roared at what he obviously considered a rare joke.

Eventually he recovered himself. "Perhaps you're a relation of his? August Dalembert?"

"No, I don't believe so."

"Then we must have a drink on it." The fat man's laugh spluttered out again. "You see, he's a big crook and I despise him intensely."

"Thank you, but I really don't have time. I'm waiting for a friend."

"Ah, the young lady," the fat man's smile was coy, knowing.

"Yes, the young lady. I'm having lunch with her."

"One can wait for her in the bar just as well. I insist." He firmly took the young man's arm.

In the bar, the little man hoisted himself on a high stool, by the open door. "You see," he pointed, this time with a triumphant smile, "one can see the elevator quite clearly from here."

Dalembert sat on the next stool. The little man snapped his fingers and ordered a whiskey and soda for himself and a double brandy for his guest. Approaching the little man had been a stupid blunder, Dalembert thought. He had let his fright and suspicion, and his slight but real panic, take control, and

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thus had precipitated a climax into his life. He swirled the brandy in its glass and took bleak consolation from the thought this wasn't his first blunder, nor likely to be his last.

". . . an American?" the little man finished. Dalembert came back to the surface.

"I'm sorry. What did you say?" There was a brief ripple of laughter. "Daydreaming, eh," he said archly, "about your young lady. Is she an American?"

"She is."

"Perfect." The other lifted two pudgy hands. "Falling in love with a wealthy American, and her with you."

Dalembert banged his glass down. "Not all Americans are wealthy."

The instant change in the little man's expression was drastic. His smile vanished, his eyes widened. He seemed about to cry.

"I feel as if you've told me there is no Santa Claus," he said. "One finds it hard to believe in poor Americans. If they run short of money, we Europeans will be living in caves, like rats." His lips trembled, but it was a laugh they produced, not a sob.

"I joke with you," he explained when Dalembert said nothing.

"Yes, I suppose you do." To hell with it all, Dalembert decided. He had to know definitely, one way or the other. "Tell me, are you here for business or on a holiday?"

"Right now I'm making a holiday out of business," the little man replied promptly. "Unfortunately, I can never quite forget my business, or leave it completely alone."

Now Dalembert knew. The game was ending, he was sure of it, and suddenly he was over his panic. He liked decision. The waiting was almost over and in a way he was relieved. He felt pleasantly uncomplicated.

"What is your business?" He took satisfaction in twisting the knife.

"Interests," the little man replied, "protecting interests."

"What interests exactly?"

"Everybody's." A gay smile crept back onto his chubby face. "I represent a highly democratic organization." He reached into his pocket and pulled out a solitary cigarette. "Also a busy one. I must soon return to Paris."

"When?"

"By tonight's train, I'm afraid." The little man let his cigarette drop, unlit, on the floor. He suddenly looked dejected.

On the other side of the lobby Dalembert saw her walk out of the elevator. He jumped off his stool and clasped the little man's shoulder.

"Cheer up," he said. "Everything must come to an end sometime."

"How true." The other looked up. "One must leave the hotel no later than six thirty," he said quietly and with grave politeness.

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"I understand." Dalembert threw a banknote on the counter. "Have a drink on me," he called as he left.

The fat little man smiled and, carefully picking up the banknote, put it in his pocket. He watched the couple disappear into the dining room. With an audible sigh he followed them.

"Oh, Lord," she said when the little man came in. "He isn't going to sit with us, I hope."

"I doubt it."

They watched him cross to his own table. Before sitting down he gave them his biggest smile and merrily waved his hand. Dalembert waved back.

"He really isn't a bad sort," he told her.

"Did you know him?"

"Never met him before in my life." He stroked her wrist. "Forget him. Tell me, what shall we do this afternoon?"

"Sunbathe, of course."

After lunch they went up to their room and changed into bathing suits. They put on the brightly colored robes he'd bought them down in the village. They wrapped hotel towels round their necks and went downstairs.

Through binoculars, from his window, the little man watched them run across the lawn and down steps which were roughhewn in the cliff and led to the beach. They vanished from sight and presently reappeared as tiny figures against the sea, far below. The little man reached out a foot and hooked a chair toward him. He settled his bulk in it and commenced his watch.

On the beach they walked to the wide, smooth rocks that were only a short run from the water's edge. They spread their robes out and lay down, side by side, eyes closed.

When she thought he was asleep, he spoke.

"Are you awake?"

"Only just."

He raised up on one elbow and looked down at her. She put both her arms around his neck, to pull him toward her.

"No." She dropped her hands back on the rock and looked very surprised.

"You're making it most difficult," he went on.

"What is it?" Before he could answer, she sat up and stared at him. "But of course I know without being told. It's over, isn't it?" She didn't sound angry, or even sad, yet.

"Before lunch, while you were upstairs, I received a telegram. I must go back to Paris tonight."

She turned her attention to the sea. "I planned this moment. Only you've gone and messed it up. It was going to be one night after dinner, sitting on the terrace over brandy and cigarettes. And I was going to be magnificent and understanding and, above all, a lady. I would say, 'Yes, I understand. You

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don't have to explain. Really, I don't mind in the least. We've had fun.'" She turned her head, away from the sea and from him. "We've had one hell of a ball." Then she began to cry.

"There is something to explain," he said. "If I had the courage I'd explain it. But I haven't." He put his arm around her shoulders. "Please don't cry."

She felt in the pocket of her robe, produced a handkerchief, blew her nose, and sniffled.

"I'm sorry—truly I am. Only for a moment I felt miserably cheap."

"It wasn't, really it wasn't. Nor were we. You must know it will never be that, no matter how often we think about one another."

"And we have had a ball." She got to her feet. He started to rise too.

"No, stay where you are. You ruined the first part of the plan, but you'll not spoil the last." She pushed him down.

"Give me a chance," she whispered. "Let me make a graceful exit."

She slowly put on her robe and draped the towel over her arm. She slipped her feet into mules and put on her sunglasses. He watched her, and she was a stranger, a nothing, somebody he'd picked up in Rome and brought here for a week.

She stepped down from the rock.

"I'm going to change and pack and leave. Give me a good hour. I should be gone by then."

He smiled up at her and hoped his smile contained the right amount of heartbreak.

"Where are you going now?" he asked.

"Pick up the Grand Tour where I left it. Not to Paris, anyway." She had taken a few steps in the white sand and now looked back.

"You're a fool," she said, "I could probably have loved you all my life."

He saw her climb slowly up the rock stairs and finally disappear over the cliff top.

Finis! With no loose ends. He thought of the fat little man, doubtless keeping a wary eye on him. He was glad things were winding up so nicely. The Lord only knew what lay ahead for him, but of one thing he was sure: from now on his thinking would be largely done for him. Which suited Dalembert fine.

He fell back against the warm flat rock and lazily allowed his eyelids to blacken out the sky.

When he woke up, nearly three hours had passed. He collected his clothes and returned to the hotel.

Their room was silent: the creams were gone from the dressing table, her dresses from the closet, even the book she had kept by her side of the bed—which she had never found time to read.

He took a cold shower, shaved carefully, and got out his luggage.

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Promptly at six thirty he entered the lobby, preceded by two porters carrying his suitcases.

The little fat man materialized from behind a pillar. "Right on time," he said jovially. Once more they shook hands.

"Will we have time for dinner?" Dalembert asked.

"Alas, one must get to the station. However, we shall eat well on the train."

When Dalembert went to pay the hotel bill, he found it had already been paid. The little man said nothing until they were in a taxi, leaving the St. Anthony standing aloof on its high hill. Then he murmured:

"Americans are notoriously generous, are they not."

From out of his pocket he pulled a pair of handcuffs.

"I hope these don't cause offense." He sounded embarrassed as he snapped them on, one over Dalembert's wrist, the other over his. "But one has regulations."

"If you are so meticulous over regulations, why didn't you arrest me a week ago?"

The little man rubbed his cheek. "Maybe because one is a sentimentalist at heart. You were so obviously *en rapport* with the young lady, and so obviously enjoying yourself, as I'm sure was she."

"Indeed we were."

"Also one must admit to selfish reasons. Frankly, I welcomed a few days of relaxation in such a pleasant spot. You led me a merry chase."

"That was my intention."

The little man laughed. "Believe in making us work for a living," he said, "though the pay of the poor French policeman—" He shrugged.

"Ah, but think of the expense account the poor French policeman has had these past months while pursuing me."

"True." Inside the dark taxi the little man's teeth seemed luminous. "I shall almost be sorry when we get back. Then it will be monotonous city duty and home every night to the tedium of one's wife."

"You don't like your wife?"

"One unfortunately doesn't understand her," the little man admitted. "Which is why one likes to leave her now and then."

"How curious." Dalembert's voice could possibly have been interpreted as sounding amused. "Some months back I, too, was forced to leave a wife whom I did not understand."

"It happens," the other replied.

"Unfortunately, I made the mistake of killing her before I left."

"Yes." The little fat man spoke with profound understanding. "Yes, I know."

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EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR: **FRED BERKENHOFF**

TITLE: ***The Mind Reader***

TYPE: Secret Service

AGENT: Wladimir Pavlovich

LOCALES: Russia, then Washington, D. C.

TIME: The Present

COMMENTS: *Wladimir Pavlovich, citizen of a totalitarian state, possessed a miraculous gift—he could read another person's thoughts. But even a mind reader can find himself over his depth.*

WLADIMIR PAVLOVICH WAS SITting on a marble bench in the huge corridor of the government palace. He was a man of thirty, with the watery blue eyes of a boy of ten and unruly blond hair on a round head which he held sidewise most of the time in a listening attitude.

Waiting on the cold marble bench to be called face to face with the Great Men he knew only from pictures and posters, he was nervous and cursed himself for having let his secret become known.

He had kept it a secret since it was revealed to him when he was eight years old. The teacher had asked him a question in arithmetic and he could plainly *hear* the answer which the teacher *thought*.

"Seven," Wladimir had said.

"Good," the teacher smiled. "Here is a more difficult one."

Vladimir had stared at her flaxen hair but the answer did not come. She looked in the book—the teacher's book gave all the answers—and suddenly he too knew the answer. "Eighty-three." The teacher was so taken aback by his sudden improvement that she had to sit down.

That was when he became aware that he could read other people's minds.

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He did not even tell his mother about it. He did not want to know what his mother thought. When words from her thinking began to reach him even against his will, he would leave the room quickly.

He became the best student in school and on the First of May he received a medal and was allowed to carry a poster in the parade. He qualified easily for the university.

There he learned languages to become an interpreter: French, German, English. He had no trouble whatever. The English teacher was an elderly, English-born lady who had been a governess on a count's estate when there were still counts. With her he learned rapidly —a close relationship between their minds was established from the beginning. He spoke and pronounced exactly as she did.

He had tried to find a wife for himself and had several affairs with girls, blondes and brunettes, all nice and sweet. But being able to read their minds, he had remained a bachelor. He was just thinking of this when the huge doors opened and he was commanded to step in.

Four men were seated at a long shiny table. He approached them timidly, but they looked at him with friendly curiosity.

"Greetings, Wladimir Pavlovich," the most important of the four said. Wladimir knew he was the most important because there were many more pictures of him than of the other three. "Please sit down in that chair," the Great Man ordered, leaning his burly chest over the gleaming table. "We have heard of your astonishing ability to read other people's thoughts. Will you tell us something about it and how it works?"

For weeks now Wladimir had been questioned by doctors, commissars, and chiefs of departments before being brought here to the summit. All he could tell them was that he did not know how it worked, that it was natural with him, and that he needed to exert no special effort to accomplish what they called his "unbelievable feats."

"Well, it's simple," he said, sitting down on the edge of the chair. "If a person in my presence thinks intensively of something, I know what it is. You are thinking now that I look rather young and inexperienced for the task you have in mind for me."

The Great Man lifted his eyebrows, then shook his bulky head as in astonishment. "And what is that task?" he asked.

"That I cannot know because you are not thinking of it at this time." The Great Men looked at each other and nodded.

But he had to give them more proof of his power. Wladimir could feel them trying to conceal thoughts which might creep in and which he should not know. Instead, they kept concentrating on

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popular slogans. The one with the dreamy eyes mentally quoted words from Pushkin and another thought of a tune by Prokofieff which Wladimir took up instantly, whistling aloud. He went on whistling even when the Great Man tried to stop thinking of it. It happened to be one of Wladimir's favorite tunes.

"That's it," the Great Man said, "I forgot what came next." And turning to the others he said, "He knows it better than I do." They all laughed; it was a very congenial atmosphere. They behaved like old friends and Wladimir grew more confident.

When they explained what they expected from him, Wladimir listened with great attention, one ear turned toward the speaker. He had learned not to look directly at people when he wanted to know what they were thinking. Until deep in the night they gave him instructions and taught him how to conduct himself in order to insure the success of his mission. The Great Men expected nothing less from him than complete success.

When he was escorted out of the building he was imbued with the seriousness and the importance of his task. It was clear to him that he must succeed, that he must find out what was really going on in the mind of the man who was shaping the destiny of a great foreign nation.

Wladimir's assignment was to go abroad to meet him and read his most secret thoughts.

According to his passport he was a special correspondent of the official newspaper, accredited with the embassy. The ambassador himself came to the ship as he landed in the foreign country and a swarm of reporters showed great curiosity in the man with the watery blue eyes and the shag of blond hair, who got such an impressive official reception.

He was treated with the consideration which is extended only to important personalities, receiving quarters in the embassy and having dinner with the ambassador. Wladimir became, if possible, still more conscious of his enormous responsibility.

"I was fortunate to arrange an immediate interview for you with the Important Man," the ambassador told Wladimir. "As I understand it, you are a psychologist of great ability. I hope you find out something about their intentions—more than I was able to. Still, you cannot look into their brains. As they say: Words are there to hide one's thoughts."

Not look into their brains? Psychology? Wladimir would not need such help: he would simply read the hidden thoughts as if he were reading a book in his native language.

The day of the interview was hot

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and humid. Wladimir felt tense as he entered the building where he would achieve a task of incalculable importance to his country, the world—and to himself. He must not think of what would happen to him if he failed. He must not fail!

The Important Man greeted him courteously and began the interview by asking Wladimir how he liked the weather. After Wladimir had given a pleasant answer, he turned his head to one side and caught the Important Man's first hidden thought: "He speaks like an Englishman." Wladimir became less nervous as he was aware that he had easily received a clear message from the Important Man's brain.

"Did you grow up in England?" the Important Man asked. "You speak English like an Englishman."

"No, sir," Wladimir replied, "but I had a genuine English teacher. May I ask a question?"

"Go ahead."

"In your opinion, sir, what measures would be the most efficient to restore friendly relations between our countries?"

"Well—I think first, a nonaggressive policy on both sides; then trade, tolerance, and the free exchange of ideas. I think these things would help a lot in the direction of peace."

As Wladimir was writing down this answer he was listening to the Important Man's brain waves. But he caught only separated words which made no sense to him. Then came a clear sentence: "Make it snappy, my boy."

The Important Man showed signs of restlessness, and Wladimir took even more time for his next question, hoping to catch the loose thoughts which inevitably creep in when a busy person gets nervous. He knew that he was not holding the Important Man's attention, that something else was on his mind. What was it? Wladimir must not interrupt the man's thinking now. It will come out—his true thoughts will come out.

"Come on, young man, come on!" the Important Man was saying to himself as Wladimir scribbled on his pad, playing for more time. But no secret thought came through, so Wladimir put the crucial question.

"Do you think, sir, that a war between our countries can be avoided?"

"With good will on both sides, yes—definitely. Indeed, we in this country have only one goal, and that is lasting peace. As you must know, all the responsible men in our government have pronounced this many times and, believe me, we are sincere."

Wladimir was stirred to the highest intensity; his head turned aside, his watery blue eyes staring at a corner. Now it will come, and Wladimir must not miss a sylla-

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ble; now will come the Important Man's *real* thought. Wladimir felt that something of great significance was churning in the Important Man's mind.

Here comes the first flash of it!

There it is—the words are perfectly clear. But what do they mean? I'm lost, thought Wladimir; the Important Man thinks in *code words!* How clever they are! Wladimir's pencil fell out of his trembling hand.

The Important Man was tapping his foot impatiently as Wladimir bent over and picked up the pencil from the carpet.

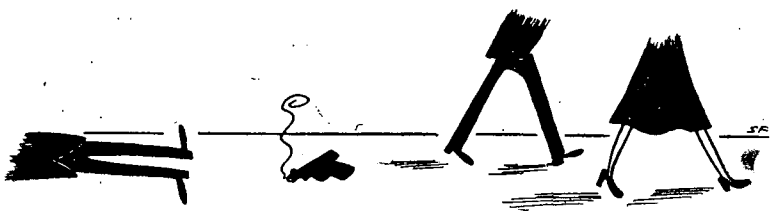
"Well," the Important Man said, "I guess that's all. I hope this interview will be of some help to you and your newspaper, and perhaps to your readers. Nice to have met you." He shook Wladimir's hand as a secretary appeared and showed Wladimir out.

Wladimir walked in a trance, his blond mane falling over his eyes. Stumbling, he followed the secretary. He reviewed again the code words he had so clearly read in the Important Man's mind: "That tremendous clout to the center field bleachers—three runs crossing the plate . . ."

The Important Man stepped hastily after Wladimir into the next room where Wladimir noticed a television set. On the screen Wladimir saw some tiny men in uniforms running about a strangely marked field.

Then he heard the Important Man ask: "What's the World Series score?"

Wladimir was still in a complete mental fog.



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EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHORS: **FRANCES AND RICHARD LOCKRIDGE**

TITLE: ***Pattern For Murder***

TYPE: Detective Story

DETECTIVES: Mr. and Mrs. North

LOCALE: New York City

TIME: The Present

COMMENTS: *Fern Hartley would have made the perfect witness in a murder case—she had total recall of the past. The only trouble was, it was Fern Hartley who was murdered . . . The first Mr. and Mrs. North detective short.*

FERN HARTLEY CAME TO NEW York to die, although that was far from her intention. She came from Centertown, in the Middle West, and died during a dinner party—given in her honor, at a reunion of schoolmates. She died at the bottom of a steep flight of stairs in a house on West Twelfth Street. She was a little woman and she wore a fluffy white dress. She stared at unexpected death through strangely bright blue eyes. . . .

There had been nothing to foreshadow so tragic an ending to the party—nothing, at any rate, on which Pamela North, who was one of the schoolmates, could precisely put a finger. It was true that Pam, as the party progressed, had increasingly felt tenseness in herself; it was also true that, toward the end, Fern Hartley had seemed to behave somewhat oddly. But the tenseness, Pam told herself, was entirely her own fault, and as for Fern's behavior—well, Fern *was* a little odd. Nice, of course, but—trying. Pam had been tried.

She had sat for what seemed

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like hours with a responsive smile stiffening her lips and with no comparable response stirring in her mind. It was from that, surely, that the tenseness—the uneasiness—arose. Not from anything on which a finger could be put. It's my own fault, Pam North thought. This is a reunion, and I don't reunite. Not with Fern, anyway.

It had been Fern on whom Pam had responsively smiled. Memories of old days, of schooldays, had fluttered from Fern's mind like pressed flowers from the yellowed pages of a treasured book. They had showered about Pam North, who had been Fern's classmate at Southwest High School in Centertown. They had showered also about Hortense Notson and about Phyllis Pitt. Classmates, too, they had been those years ago—they and, for example, a girl with red hair.

"—*red* hair," Fern Hartley had said, leaning forward, eyes bright with memory. "Across the aisle from you in Miss Burton's English class. Of *course* you remember, Pam. She went with the boy who stuttered."

I *am* Pamela North, who used to be Pamela Britton, Pam told herself, behind a fixed smile. I'm not an impostor; I did go to Southwest High. If only I could prove it by remembering something—anything. Any *little* thing.

"The teacher with green hair?" Pam North said, by way of experiment. "Streaks of, anyway? Because the dye—"

Consternation clouded Fern's bright eyes. *"Pam!"* she said. "That was another one entirely. Miss Burton was the one who—"

It had been like that from the start of the party—the party of three couples and Miss Fern Hartley, still of Centertown. They were gathered in the long living room of the Stanley Pitts' house—the gracious room which ran the depth of the small, perfect house—an old New York house, retaining the charm (if also something of the inconvenience) of the previous century.

As the party started that warm September evening, the charm was uppermost. From open casement windows at the end of the room there was a gentle breeze. In it, from the start, Fern's memories had fluttered.

And none of the memories had been Pam North's memories. Fern has total recall; I have total amnesia, Pam thought, while keeping the receptive smile in place, since one cannot let an old schoolmate down. Did the others try as hard? Pam wondered. Find themselves as inadequate to recapture the dear, dead days?

Both Hortense Notson and Phyllis Pitt had given every evidence of trying, Pam thought, letting her mind wander. Fern was now reliving a perfectly wonderful picnic, of their junior year. Pam was not.

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Pam did not let the smile waver; from time to time she nodded her bright head and made appreciative sounds. Nobody had let Fern down; all had taken turns in listening—even the men. Jerry North was slacking now, but he had been valiant. His valor had been special, since he had never even been in Centertown. And Stanley Pitt had done his bit, too; of course, he was the host. Of course, Fern was the Pitts' house guest; what a lovely house to be a guest in, Pam thought, permitting her eyes briefly to accompany her mind in its wandering.

Stanley—what a distinguished-looking man he is, Pam thought—was with Jerry, near the portable bar. She watched Jerry raise his glass as he listened. Her own glass was empty, and nobody was doing anything about it. An empty glass to go with an empty mind, Pam thought, and watched Fern sip ginger ale. Fern never drank anything stronger. Not that she had anything against drinking. Of course not. But even one drink made her feel all funny.

"Well," Pam had said, when Fern had brought the subject up, earlier on. "Well, that's more or less the idea, I suppose. This side of hilarious, of course."

"You know," Fern said then, "you always did talk funny. Remember when we graduated and you—"

Pam didn't remember. Without looking away from Fern, or letting the smile diminish, Pam nevertheless continued to look around the room. How lovely Phyllis is, Pam thought—really is. Blonde Phyllis Pitt was talking to Clark Notson, blond also, and sturdy, and looking younger than he almost certainly was.

Clark had married Hortense in Centertown. He was older—Pam remembered that he had been in college when they were in high school. He had married her when she was a skinny, dark girl, who had had to be prouder than anyone else because her parents lived over a store and not, properly, in a house. And look at her now, Pam thought, doing so. Dark still—and slim and quickly confident, and most beautifully arrayed.

Well, Pam thought, we've all come a long way. (She nodded, very brightly, to another name from the past—a name signifying nothing.) Stanley Pitt and Jerry—neglecting his own wife, Jerry North was—had found something of fabulous interest to discuss, judging by their behavior. Stanley was making points, while Jerry listened and nodded. Stanley was making points one at a time, with the aid of the thumb and the fingers of his right hand. He touched thumb-tip to successive fingertips, as if to crimp each point in place. And Jerry—how selfish could a man get—ran a hand through this hair, as he did when he was interested.

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"Oh," Pam said. "Of course I remember *him*, Fern."

A little lying is a gracious thing.

What a witness Fern would make, Pam thought. Everything that had happened—beginning, apparently, at the age of two—was brightly clear in her mind, not muddy as in the minds of so many. The kind of witness Bill Weigand, member in good standing of the New York City Police Department, always hoped to find and almost never did—never had, that she could remember, in all the many investigations she and Jerry had shared since they first met Bill years ago.

Fern would be a witness who really remembered. If Fern, Pam thought, knew something about a murder, or where a body was buried, or any of the other important things which so often come up, she would remember it precisely and remember it whole. A good deal of sifting would have to be done, but Bill was good at that.

Idly, her mind still wandering, Pam hoped that Fern did not, in fact, know anything of buried bodies. It could, obviously, be dangerous to have so total a recall and to put no curb on it. She remembered, and this from association with Bill, how often somebody did make that one revealing remark too many. Pam sternly put a curb on her own mind and imagination. What could Fern—pleasant, bubbling Fern, who had not adventured out of Centertown, excepting for occasional trips like these—know of dangerous things?

Pam North, whose lips ached, in whose mind Fern's words rattled, looked hard at Jerry, down the room, at the bar. Get me out of this, Pam willed across the space between them. Get me out of this! It had been known to work or had sometimes seemed to work. It did not now. Jerry concentrated on what Stanley Pitt was saying. Jerry ran a hand through his hair.

"Oh, dear," Pam said, breaking into the flow of Fern's words, as gently as she could. "Jerry wants me for something. You know how husbands are."

She stopped abruptly, remembering that Fern didn't, never having had one. She got up—and was saved by Phyllis, who moved in. What a hostess, Pam thought, and moved toward Jerry and the bar. The idea of saying that to poor Fern, Pam thought. This is certainly one of my hopeless evenings. She went toward Jerry.

"I don't," she said when she reached him, "remember anything about anything. Except one teacher with green hair, and that was the wrong woman."

Jerry said it seemed very likely.

"There's something a little ghoulish about all this digging up of the past," Pam said. "Suppose some of it's still alive?" she added.

"Huh?" Jerry said.

He was told not to bother. And

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that Pam could do with a drink. Jerry poured, for them both, from a pitcher in which ice tinkled.

"Some time," Pam said, "she's going to remember that one thing too many. That's what I mean. You see?"

"No," Jerry said, simply.

"Not everybody," Pam said, a little darkly, "wants everything remembered about everything. Because—"

Stanley Pitt, who had turned away, turned quickly back. He informed Pam that she had something there.

"I heard her telling Hortense—" Stanley Pitt said, and stopped abruptly, since Hortense, slim and graceful (and *so* beautifully arrayed) was coming toward them.

"How Fern doesn't change," Hortense said. "Pam, do you remember the boy next door?"

"I don't seem to remember anything," Pam said. "Not anything at all."

"You don't remember," Hortense said. "I don't remember. Phyllis doesn't. And with it all, she's so—sweet." She paused. "Or is she?" she said. "Some of the things she brings up—always doing ohs, the boy next door was. How does one do an oh?"

"Oh," Jerry said, politely demonstrating, and then, "Was he the one with green hair?" The others looked blank at that, and Pam said it was just one of the things she'd got mixed up, and now Jerry was mixing it worse. And, Pam said, did Hortense ever feel she hadn't really gone to Southwest High School at all and was merely pretending she had? Was an impostor?

"Far as I can tell," Hortense said, "I never lived in Centertown. Just in a small, one-room vacuum. Woman without a past." She paused. "Except," she said, in another tone, "Fern remembers me in great detail."

Stanley Pitt had been looking over their heads—looking at his wife, now the one listening to Fern. In a moment of silence, Fern's voice fluted. "Really, a dreadful thing to happen," Fern said. There was no context.

"Perhaps," Stanley said, turning back to them, "it's better to have no past than to live in one. Better all around. And safer."

He seemed about to continue, but then Clark Notson joined them. Clark did not, Pam thought, look like a man who was having a particularly good time. "Supposed to get Miss Hartley her ginger ale," he said. He spoke rather hurriedly.

Jerry, who was nearest the bar, said, "Here," and reached for the innocent bottle—a bottle, Pam thought, which looked a little smug and virtuous among the other bottles. Jerry used a silver opener, snapped off the bottle cap. The cap bounced off, tinkled against a bottle.

"Don't know your own

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strength," Clark said, and took the bottle and, with it, a glass into which Jerry dropped ice. "Never drinks anything stronger, the lady doesn't," Clark said, and bore away the bottle.

"And doesn't need to," Hortense Notson said, and drifted away. She could drift immaculately.

"She buys dresses," Pam said. "Wouldn't you know?"

"As distinct—?" Jerry said, and was told he knew perfectly well what Pam meant.

"Buys them for, not from," Pam said.

To this, Jerry simply said, "Oh."

It was then a little after eight, and there was a restless circulation in the long room. Pam was with Phyllis Pitt. Phyllis assured her that food would arrive soon. And hadn't old times come flooding back?

"Mm," Pam said. Pam was then with Clark Notson and, with him, talked unexpectedly of tooth paste. One never knows what will come up at a party. It appeared that Clark's firm made tooth paste. Stanley Pitt joined them. He said Clark had quite an operation there. Pam left them and drifted, dutifully, back to Fern, who sipped ginger ale. Fern's eyes were very bright. They seemed almost to glitter.

(But that's absurd, Pam thought. People's don't, only cats'.)

"It's so exciting," Fern said, and looked around the room, presumably at "it." "To meet you all again, and your nice husbands and—" She paused. "Only," she said, "I keep wondering . . ."

Pam waited. She said, "What, Fern?"

"Oh," Fern said. "Nothing dear. Nothing really. Do you remember—"

Pam did not. She listened for a time, and was relieved by Hortense, and drifted on again. For a minute or two, then, Pam North was alone and stood looking up and down the softly lighted room. Beyond the windows at the far end, lights glowed up from the garden below. The room was filled, but not harshly, with conversation—there seemed, somehow, to be more than the seven of them in it. Probably, Pam thought, memories crowded it—the red-haired girl, the stuttering boy.

Fern laughed. Her laughter was rather high in pitch. It had a little "hee" at the end. That little "hee," Pam thought idly, would identify Fern—be something to remember her by. As Jerry's habit of running his hand through his hair would identify him if, about all else, she suddenly lost her memory. (As I've evidently begun to do, Pam North thought.) Little tricks. And Fern puts her right index finger gently to the tip of her nose, presumably when she's thinking. Why, Pam thought, she did that as a girl, and was surprised to remember.

Her host stood in front of her,

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wondering what he could get her. She had, Pam told him, everything.

"Including your memories?" Stanley Pitt asked her. Pam noticed a small scar on his chin. But it wasn't, of course, the same thing as—as running a hand through your hair. But everybody has something, which is one way of telling them apart.

"I seem," Pam said, "a little short of memories."

"By comparison with Miss Hartley," Stanley said, "who isn't? A pipe line to the past. Can't I get you a drink?"

He could not. Pam had had enough. So, she thought, had all of them. Not that anybody was in the least tight. But still . . .

Over the other voices, that of Fern Hartley was raised. There was excitement in it. So it isn't alcohol, Pam thought, since Fern hadn't had any. It's just getting keyed up at a party. She looked toward Fern, who was talking, very rapidly, to Jerry. No doubt, Pam thought, about what I was like in high school. Not that there's anything he shouldn't know. But still . . .

Fern was now very animated. If, Pam thought, I asked whether anyone here was one cocktail up I'd—why, I'd say Fern. Fern, of all people. Or else, Pam thought, she has some exciting surprise.

It was now eight thirty. A maid appeared at the door, waited to be noticed, and nodded to Phyllis Pitt, who said, at once, "Dinner, everybody." The dining room was downstairs, on a level with the garden. "These old stairs," Phyllis said. "Everybody be careful."

The stairs were, indeed, very steep, and the treads very narrow. But there were handrails and a carpet. The stairway ended in the dining room, where candles glowed softly on the table, among flowers.

"If you'll sit—" Phyllis said, starting with Pam North. "And you and—" They moved to the places indicated. "And Fern—" Phyllis said, and stopped. "Why," she said, "where is—"

She did not finish, because Fern Hartley stood at the top of the steep staircase. She was a slight figure in a white dress. She seemed to be staring fixedly down at them, her eyes strangely bright. Her face was flushed and she made odd, uncertain movements with her little hands.

"I'm—" Fern said, and spoke harshly, loudly, and so that the word was almost a shapeless sound. "I'm—"

And then Fern Hartley, taking both hands from the rails, pitched headfirst down the staircase. In a great moment of silence, her body made a strange, soft thudding on the stairs. She did not cry out.

At the bottom of the red-carpeted stairs she lay quite still. Her head was at a hideous angle to her body—an impossible angle to her body. That was how she died.

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Fern Hartley died of a broken neck. There was no doubt. Six people had seen her fall. Now she lay at the bottom of the stairs and no one would ever forget her soft quick falling down that steep flight. An ambulance surgeon confirmed the cause of her death and another doctor from up the street —called when it seemed the ambulance would never get there—confirmed it, too.

But after he had knelt for some time by the body the second doctor beckoned the ambulance surgeon and they went out into the hallway. Then the ambulance surgeon beckoned one of the policemen who had arrived with the ambulance, and the policeman went into the hall with them. After a few minutes, the policeman returned and asked, politely enough, that they all wait upstairs. There were, he said meaninglessly, a few formalities.

They waited upstairs, in the living room. They waited for more than two hours, puzzled and in growing uneasiness. Then a thinnish man of medium height, about whom there was nothing special in appearance, came into the room and looked around at them.

"Why, *Bill!*" Pam North said.

The thinnish man looked at her, and then at Jerry North, and said, "Oh." Then he said there were one or two points.

And then Pam said, "Oh," on a note strangely flat.

How one introduces a police officer, who happens to be an old and close friend, to other friends who happen to be murder suspects —else why was Bill Weigand there? —had long been a moot question with Pam and Jerry North. Pam said, "This is Bill Weigand, everybody. Captain Weigand. He's—he's a policeman. So there must be—" And stopped.

"All right, Pam," Bill Weigand said. Then, "You all saw her fall. Tell me about it." He looked around at them, back at Pam North. It was she who told him.

Her eyes had been "staring"? Her face flushed? Her movements uncertain? Her voice hoarse? "Yes," Pam said, confirming each statement. Bill Weigand looked from one to another of the six in the room. He received nods of confirmation. One of the men—tall, dark-haired but with gray coming, a little older than the others—seemed about to speak. Bill waited. The man shook his head. Bill got them identified then. The tall man was Stanley Pitt. This was his house.

"But," Bill said, "she hadn't been drinking. The medical examiner is quite certain of that." He seemed to wait for comment.

"She said she never did," Pam told him.

"So—" Bill said.

Then Hortense Notson spoke, in a tense voice. "You act," she said, "as if you think one of us pushed her."

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Weigand looked at her carefully. He said, "No. That didn't happen, Mrs. Notson. How could it have happened? You were all in the dining room, looking up at her. How could any of you have pushed her?"

"Then," Clark Notson said, and spoke quickly, with unexpected violence. "Then why all this? She . . . what? Had a heart attack?"

"Possibly," Bill said. "But the doctors—"

Again he was interrupted.

"I've heard of you," Notson said, and leaned forward in his chair. "Aren't you homicide?"

"Right," Bill said. He looked around again, slowly. "As Mr. Notson said, I'm homicide." And he waited.

Phyllis Pitt—the pretty, the very pretty, light-haired woman—had been crying. More than the rest, in expression, in movements, she showed the shock of what had happened. "Those dreadful stairs," she said, as if to herself. "Those dreadful stairs."

Her husband got up and went to her and leaned over her. He touched her bright hair and said, very softly, "All right, Phyl. All right."

"Bill," Pam said. "Fern fell downstairs and—and died. What more is there?"

"You all agree," Bill said, "that she was flushed and excited and uncertain—as if she had been drinking. But she hadn't been drinking. And . . . the pupils of her eyes were dilated. That was why she seemed to be staring. Because, you see, she couldn't see where she was going. So . . ." He paused. "She walked off into the air. I have to find out why. So what I want . . ."

It took him a long time to get what he wanted, which was all they could remember, one memory reinforcing another, of what had happened from the start of the dinner party until it ended with Fern Hartley, at the foot of the staircase, all her memories dead. Pam, listening, contributing what she could, could not see that a pattern formed—a pattern of murder.

Fern had seemed entirely normal—at least, until near the end. They agreed on that. She had always remembered much about the past and talked of it. Meeting old school friends, after long separation, she had seemed to remember everything—far more than any of the others.

"Most of it, to be honest, wasn't very interesting." That was Hortense Notson. Hortense looked at Pam, at Phyllis Pitt.

"She was so sweet," Phyllis said, in a broken voice.

"So—so interested herself." Pam said, "A good deal of it was pretty long ago, Bill."

Fern had shared her memories chiefly with the other women. But she had talked of the past, also, with the men.

"It didn't mean much to me,"

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Stanley Pitt said. "It seemed to be all about Centertown, and I've never been in Centertown. Phyllis and I met in New York." He paused. "What's the point of this?" he said.

"I don't know," Bill Weigand told him. "Not yet. Everything she remembered seemed to be trivial? Nothing stands out? To any of you?"

"She remembered I had a black eye the first time she saw me," Clark Notson said. "Hortense and I—when we were going together—ran into her at a party. It was a long time ago. And I had a black eye, she said. I don't remember anything about it. I don't even remember the party, actually. Yes, I'd call it pretty trivial."

"My God," Stanley Pitt said. "*Is* there some point to this?"

"I don't know," Bill said again, and was patient. "Had you known Miss Hartley before, Mr. Pitt?"

"Met her for the first time yesterday," Stanley told him. "We had her to dinner and she stayed the night. Today I took her to lunch, because Phyl had things to do about the party. And—" He stopped. He shrugged and shook his head, seemingly at the futility of everything.

"I suppose," Jerry North said, "the point is—did she remember something that somebody—one of us—wanted forgotten?"

"Yes," Bill said. "It may be that."

Then it was in the open. And, with it in the open, the six looked at one another; and there was a kind of wariness in the manner of their looking. Although what on earth I've got to be wary about I don't know, Pam thought. Or Jerry, she added in her mind. She couldn't have told Jerry anything about me. Well, not anything important. At least not very . . .

"I don't understand," Phyllis said, and spoke dully. "I just don't understand at all. Fern just—just fell down those awful stairs."

It became like a game of tennis, with too many players, played in the dark. "Try to remember," Bill had told them; and it seemed they tried. But all they remembered was apparently trivial.

"There was something about a boy next door," Phyllis Pitt remembered. "A good deal older than she was—than we all were. Next door to Fern. A boy named—" She moved her hands helplessly. "I've forgotten. A name I'd never heard before. Something—she said something dreadful—happened to him. I suppose he died of something."

"No," Hortense Notson said. "She told me about him. He didn't die. He went to jail. He was always saying 'oh.'" She considered. "I think," she said, "he was named Russell something." She paused again. "Never in my life, did I hear so much about people I'd never heard of. Gossip about the past."

Stanley Pitt stood up. His impatience was evident.

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"Look," he said. "This is my house, Captain. These people are my guests. Is any of this badgering getting you anywhere? And . . . where is there to get? Maybe she had a heart attack. Maybe she ate something that—" He stopped, rather abruptly; rather as if he had stumbled over something.

Weigand waited, but Pitt did not continue. Then Bill said they had thought of that. The symptoms—they had all noticed the symptoms—including the dilation of the pupils, might have been due to acute food poisoning. But she had eaten almost nothing during the cocktail period. The maid who had passed canapés was sure of that. Certainly she had eaten nothing the rest had not. And she had drunk only ginger ale, from a freshly opened bottle.

"Which," Bill said, "apparently you opened, Jerry."

Jerry North ran his right hand through his hair. He looked at Bill blankly.

"Of course you did," Pam said. "So vigorously the bottle cap flew off. Don't you—"

"Oh," Jerry said. Everybody looked at him. "Is that supposed—"

But he was interrupted by Pitt, still leaning forward in his chair. "Wait," Pitt said, and put right thumb and index finger together, firmly, as if to hold a thought pinched between them. They waited.

"This place I took her to lunch," Stanley said. "It's a little place—little downstairs place, but wonderful food. I've eaten there off and on for years. But . . . I don't suppose it's too damned sanitary. Not like your labs are, Clark. And the weather's been hot. And—" He seemed to remember something else and held this new memory between thumb and finger. "Miss Hartley ate most of a bowl of ripe olives. Said she never seemed to get enough of them. And . . . isn't there something that can get into ripe olives? That can poison people?" He put the heel of one hand to his forehead. "God," he said. "Do you suppose it was that?"

"You mean food poisoning?" Weigand said. "Yes—years ago people got it from ripe olives. But not recently, that I've heard of. New methods and—"

"The olives are imported," Pitt said. "From Italy, I think. Yes. Dilated pupils—"

"Right," Bill said. "And the other symptoms match quite well. You may—"

But now he was interrupted by a uniformed policeman, who brought him a slip of paper. Bill Weigand looked at it and put it in his pocket and said, "Right," and the policeman went out again.

"Mr. Notson," Bill said, "you're production manager of the Winslow Pharmaceutical Company, aren't you?"

Notson looked blank. He said, "Sure."

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"Which makes all kinds of drug products?"

Notson continued to look blank. He nodded his head.

"And Mr. Pitt," Bill Weigand said. "You're—"

He's gone off on a tangent, Pam North thought, half listening. What difference can it make that Mr. Notson makes drugs—or that Mr. Pitt tells people how to run offices and plants better—is an "efficiency engineer"? Because just a few minutes ago, somebody said something really important. Because it was wrong. Because—Oh! Pam thought. It's on the tip of my mind. If people would only be quiet, so I could think. If Bill only wouldn't go off on these—

"All kinds of drugs," Bill was saying, from his tangent, in the distance. "Including preparations containing atropine?"

She heard Clark Notson say, "Yes. Sure."

"Because," Bill said, and now Pam heard him clearly—very clearly— "Miss Hartley had been given atropine. It might have been enough to have killed her, if she had not had quick and proper treatment. She'd had enough to bring on dizziness and double vision. So that, on the verge of losing consciousness, she fell downstairs and broke her neck. Well?"

He looked around.

"The ginger ale," Jerry said. "The ginger ale I opened. That . . . opened so easily. Was that it?"

"Probably," Bill said. "The cap taken off carefully. Put back on carefully. After enough atropine sulphate had been put in. Enough to stop her remembering." Again he looked around at them; and Pam looked, too, and could see nothing—except shock—in any face. There seemed to be fear in none.

"The doctors suspected atropine from the start," Bill said, speaking slowly. "But the symptoms of atropine poisoning are very similar to those of food poisoning—or ptomaine. If she had lived to be treated, almost any physician would have diagnosed food poisoning—particularly after Mr. Pitt remembered the olives—and treated for that. Not for atropine. Since the treatments are different, she probably would not have lived." He paused. "Well," he said, "what did she remember? So that there was death for remembrance?"

Phyllis Pitt covered her eyes with both hands and shook her head slowly, dully. Hortense Notson looked at Weigand with narrowed eyes and her husband with—Pam thought—something like defiance. Stanley Pitt looked at the floor and seemed deep in thought, to be planning each thought between thumb and finger, when Weigand turned from them and said, "Yes?" to a man in civilian clothes. He went to talk briefly with the man. He returned. He said the telephone was a useful thing; he said the Centertown police were efficient.

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"The boy next door," Weigand said, "was named Russell Clarkson. He was some years—fifteen, about—older than Fern Hartley. Not a boy any more, when she was in high school, but still 'the boy next door.' He did go to jail, as you said, Mrs. Notson. He helped set up a robbery of the place he worked in. A payroll messenger was killed. Clarkson got twenty years to life. And—he escaped in two years, and was never caught. And—*he was a chemist.* Mr. Notson. As you are. Mr. *Clark* Notson."

Notson was on his feet. His face was very red and he no longer looked younger than he was. He said, "You're crazy! I can prove—" His voice rose until he was shouting across the few feet between himself and Weigand.

And then it came to Pam—came with a kind of violent clarity. "Wait, Bill. *Wait!*" Pam shouted. "It wasn't 'ohs' at all. Not *saying* them. That's what was wrong."

They were listening. Bill was listening.

Then Pam pointed at Hortense. "You," she said, "the first time you said *doing* ohs. Not saying 'Oh.' You even asked how one *did* an oh. We thought it was the—the o-h kind of O. But—it was the *letter* O. And—*look at him now!* He's doing them now. *With his fingers.*"

And now she pointed at Stanley Pitt, who was forming the letter O with the thumb and index finger of his right hand; who now, violently, closed into fists his betraying hands. A shudder ran through his body. But he spoke quietly, without looking up from the floor.

"She hadn't quite remembered," he said, as if talking of something which had happened a long time ago. "Not quite." And he put the thumb and index finger tip to tip again, to measure the smallness of a margin. "But—she would have. She remembered everything. I've changed a lot and she was a little girl, but . . ."

He looked at his hands. "I've always done that, I guess," he said. He spread his fingers and looked at his hands. "Once it came up," he said, "there would be fingerprints. So—I had to try." He looked up, then, at his wife. "You see, Phyl, that I had to try?"

Phyllis covered her face with her hands.

After a moment Stanley Pitt looked again at his hands, spreading them in front of him. Slowly he began to bring together the fingertips and thumbtips of both hands; and he studied the movements of his fingers intently, as if they were new to him. He sat so, his hands moving in patterns they had never been able to forget, until Weigand told him it was time to go.

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EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR: **MIRIAM ALLEN DEFORD**

TITLE: ***Walking Alone***

TYPE: Crime Story

LOCALE: Belleville, United States

TIME: The Present

COMMENTS: *John Larsen was an innocent bystander, but he faced the most difficult problem of his life. Should he tell the police? . . . What would you have done in Larsen's position?*

JOHN LARSEN STOOD WAITING FOR the bus to take him to work. It was only the middle of March, but spring had sent out a feeler; the air had a hint of warmth in it and the sky was a deeper blue than winter had known. Across the street little green spikes of leaf-buds dotted the poplar trees flanking a billboard.

All at once he remembered sharply springlike mornings in his boyhood, thirty years ago. He would wake and see a sky like this through the open window, and his heart would be filled with a strange, nameless emotion, made up of a yearning for something unknown, a longing for something not yet experienced.

The bus was not in sight. If it was late, he would be late too, and Sims would put on his sour face and say, "Busy day, Larsen. Can't you ever get here on time?" But it wouldn't be a busy day—it seldom was. People don't buy rugs and carpets the way they buy vegetables and paper napkins.

"Fed up," Larsen muttered to himself, waiting alone on the dreary corner. "Just fed up." His mind went back to the hour before, and Kate's peevish voice. "For heaven's sake, John, wake up! You want to be late for work? Next thing you know, they'll fire you, and then where'll we be? Hurry up! Think I like having to get up at all hours to cook your breakfast? Least you can do is eat it when I make it."

It was the same old monologue.

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When he'd left she would crawl back into bed, in her unappetizing curlers, and goodness knew when she'd crawl out again to dawdle through the day. He could fix breakfast himself in half the time she took, but then she wouldn't be a martyr to an inefficient, dreamy failure of a husband.

He shivered in his worn topcoat; it wasn't as springlike as he first thought, although the sun would warm things soon. His mind flitted to the woods and fields of his childhood, to the freedom and irresponsibility of those far-off years. He peered down the street; there was no sign of the bus.

Abruptly he crossed to the corner drug store, before common sense could change his mind. He fished for a dime in his pocket and went into the phone booth.

"Mr. Sims? This is Larsen. Look, I'm awfully sorry, but I just can't make it today. It's my back; I'm going to the doctor about it. I'll be there tomorrow, no matter how I feel. No, I couldn't hold out till lunchtime—my back's like a toothache. Yes, I know, but— Well, thanks, Mr. Sims. I'll do that, yes, sir. I'm sorry too."

Sims would wonder why he hadn't had Kate phone for him, if he felt so bad. Maybe he'd say it took a younger man to handle the job. Oh, to hell with it; it was too late now to reconsider.

He stayed on that side of the street, and the bus he took was one going in the other direction, away from the city. He rode to the end of the line.

Just to be alone—it was wonderful. Nobody nagging at him, no need to watch the time. He'd never been in the suburb where the bus landed him. For a while he just walked around, admiring houses and gardens—the sort of places he'd once dreamed of living in himself, when he and Kate were first married. Perhaps if they'd had any kids to be ambitious for, or if Kate hadn't turned into the slatternly shrew she'd become—

By noon he was tired of walking. He went back to the little business district and had a hamburger and coffee at a half-deserted lunch room. While he was there he asked about the bus schedule. Just so he got back home at the regular time, Kate would never know and have something new to yell at him about. No danger she'd phone him at the store; she knew they wouldn't call him off the floor except for an emergency. He bought a pack of cigarettes and a magazine and struck off along a promising road leading beyond the town.

It was more than an hour before he found what he wanted—a friendly little wood with a brook running through it and a sunny clearing by the side of an unfrequented road where he could sit on a fallen tree-stump and read and smoke and let the peace and silence seep into his nerves. Dotted around

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in the near distance were the tops of tree-hidden houses on the hill, but none of them was near enough to matter. Only an occasional car passed in either direction, and nobody noticed him in his snug sanctuary. It was very quiet; presently he dozed off.

He awoke with a start, and looked first at the sun and then at his watch. It was 4:40; he had plenty of time to catch the bus. He stood up and stretched, debating whether to walk on a bit farther or turn around and saunter slowly back to the bus stop.

Up the road, in the silence, he heard a shuffling in dry leaves. He peered out, and saw a girl in early teens coming toward him on the opposite side of the road. He stood back, waiting till she had passed; it might scare the kid to see a strange man suddenly emerge from the woods. Leaning against a tree, he stood watching her.

She was a pretty girl, with long golden hair falling over the collar of her red sweater. She wore a dark blue skirt, red socks, and brown leather scuffs, and under her arm were a few schoolbooks. She was singing to herself as she walked, in a clear, thin, childish voice. Pretty late for her to be coming home from school, but she might have stayed for some student get-together. Probably she lived in one of the houses whose roofs showed above the trees; there must be short cuts up the hill to them.

She passed him now and he waited for her to go out of sight around a curve in the road. Then he heard a car coming, slowly, from behind them, in the same direction she was walking.

It was a rattletrap old black coupe, with only the driver in it. Larsen caught a glimpse of him—a heavy-set man of about his own age, with a shock of dark hair, and no hat. The car passed him too, and Larsen stepped out onto the road and turned toward the town. Belatedly he thought he could have hailed the car and perhaps got a lift to the bus stop. If only he had!

The girl was now about a hundred feet away, just nearing the curve. The car had caught up with her. It stopped.

Everything happened so suddenly Larsen could not collect his wits, which were dulled from his unaccustomed nap.

The driver jumped out, said something to the girl, and she shook her head. He grabbed her by the shoulder, hustled her toward the car. She struggled and started to scream; he clamped one hand over her mouth. He dragged her in, got in after her, slammed the door. She jumped up—perhaps she saw Larsen now, where he stood paralyzed with bewilderment—reached for the door handle, tried again to scream. The man struck her twice, knocking her to the floor. Then he took the wheel and

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drove rapidly away. By the time Larsen, shaking himself from his stupor, had run to the curve, the car and its occupants were out of sight. He had not noticed the license number.

All the way back to the suburban town he pondered what he should do. It was his duty, he knew, to hunt out whatever police the town possessed and report what he had seen. But that would involve explaining why he himself was there, giving his name and address, appearing later as a witness if he had seen a crime committed and the man were caught. Then Sims would know he had lied about his absence from work. Kate would know too. Sims would probably fire him. Kate would make his life an even worse hell on earth. He might never get another job, even one as poor as this one, at his age. He had no money saved, and they were in debt for half the things in the house.

John Larsen had a clear, horrifying view of what he would be letting himself in for if he reported the incident.

He didn't really know the circumstances. The man might even be the girl's father. She might have been playing hooky, just as he had done, or have been disobeying some parental command. What he had witnessed might have been only severe but lawful punishment for some youthful misdemeanor.

Besides, what good could he do? He couldn't actually identify the man—he'd caught just a passing glimpse of him, could never pick him out in any assortment of heavy middle-aged men with thick dark hair. He would only be getting himself into a mess he'd never get out of, and for nothing at all.

He reached the town with time to spare, without catching sight or sound again of the black car; there were byroads all the way, any of which it could have taken. To pacify his conscience, he looked around for a policeman in the business district, but there was no sign of one. Stifling his uneasiness, he took the next bus, found it would land him in the city too early, got off about halfway, and waited for the following one. He reached home at the usual time, and, as usual, found that Kate didn't have dinner ready. He sat grumpily reading the evening paper, while she complained and scolded at him from the kitchen. They never asked each other for news of their day; there was never anything to tell that would interest either of them.

He had sense enough the next morning to tell Sims that the doctor had said it was merely a touch of lumbago, and that the rest had about fixed it. When he saw Sim's eyes on him he remembered occasionally to grimace and rub his back. By luck he sold a woman a big length of old-fashioned stair-carpeting they'd been trying to get rid of for months. Sims showed his gratification by saying good night

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and hoping Larsen's back would be all better soon. He didn't, however, forget to dock him for the day off. That meant Larsen would have to skip lunches all next week; he couldn't let Kate know his pay was short.

When he stopped to get the paper, two evenings later, there was a picture on the first page. *Have You Seen This Girl?* the caption said. He recognized her instantly. The clothing they described was the same she had worn.

Her name was Diane Morrison, and she was the daughter of the principal of Belleville Consolidated Junior High School, where she was a first-year student. Usually her father drove her to and from school. On Tuesday she had waited for him till half-past four, then he found he would be tied up for another hour at least; so, as had sometimes happened in the past, the father told her she'd better walk the mile or so home and tell her mother he'd be late. When he got there about six she hadn't appeared. She was a reliable child who would have phoned if she had stopped off anywhere. Her parents had searched all the way back to the school and had called all her friends. But nobody had seen Diane. And nobody had seen her since.

Because there was a possibility of kidnaping, the F.B.I. had come into the case. They and the State and county police were combing the woods and hills around Belleville. So far they had found no trace or clue.

"For mercy's sake," Kate snapped, "can't you open your mouth except to eat? Never a word out of you, just wool-gathering. Here I am, cooped up all day long, and you come home and act like I was a piece of furniture or something. How do you think I—"

He let her rave. He was trying to decide. Should he or shouldn't he? Would it help at all if he did? They might spot the man if he described him. But then where would John Larsen be? In the worst trouble of his life.

He glanced at Kate and almost considered telling her the truth and asking her advice. Then he reconsidered, quailing at how she would take it. And he knew what her advice would be—keep out of it and don't get us into an even deeper jam than you've risked getting us into already. Let the police do their own work—that's what they're paid for.

He began buying a morning paper as well as an evening one, forcing himself, with a cold fear at the pit of his stomach, to search them for news.

A week later, under a covering of gravel in an abandoned quarry, they found her body. Her skull had been fractured in three places by some heavy instrument like a tire iron. She was covered with cuts and bruises, and she had been vi-

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olated. Clutched in her right hand was a man's handkerchief, red-and-white checked.

John Larsen lay awake all night, with Kate breathing heavily beside him. By the time the window was turning gray, he had decided to let it go a while longer. He recalled crime stories he had read; there would be fragments of flesh under the girl's fingernails, the scientific cops would find minute threads and hairs on her clothing, they would go over the cars of all possible suspects for fingerprints. In a little place like Belleville they would soon get on to the dark-haired man, unless he was a stranger from some other place.

It was the purest chance that Larsen had witnessed the abduction. Suppose he *hadn't* been there—then they would have had to investigate just as they were doing now. He saw himself trying to explain to some incredulous F.B.I. man just what he was doing on a road near Belleville when he ought to have been at work in the city. Looking back now, his whole day of playing hooky seemed unbelievable childishness. Nobody would understand; they'd be sure he was lying. Why, they might think he'd made up the story just to protect himself. They might put him through a third degree. Lying there in bed, his flesh crawled. And whether they believed him or not, he'd be ruined. The only thing to do was to pretend to himself that that day had never happened. They'd find the man soon, anyway—they always did. And then he'd be glad he'd had the sense to let bad enough alone.

When, three days later, he saw the headline, *Morrison Suspect Captured,* his relief was so great that tears came to his eyes. Standing in the bus, he read the story avidly.

The man arrested was an assistant janitor at the high school. His name was Joseph Kennelly. He had been under suspicion from the beginning, the story said. He knew the girl by sight, of course. He was unmarried, and lived alone in a two-room shack near the quarry where the body had been found. And he had a police record—not involving sex crimes, but a long series of arrests for disorderly conduct and for driving while drunk. He had spent part of his boyhood in a home for retarded children.

The police theory was that he had seen the girl leave school late, when his own hours of duty were over. There was no question that he had shown an unwholesome interest in her; now, when it was too late, boy students related how Joe had made vulgar cracks about Diane's golden hair and budding figure. He was a slipshod worker, on bad terms with the school principal, and had been in trouble more than once for drinking on the job; Mr. Morrison had threatened to have him fired. So the motives for

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the crime were clear—revenge and lust.

And the handkerchief was his—a laundry mark proved it. Moreover, he had a deep scratch, a week or two old, on the left side of his jaw.

He denied everything heatedly, of course. He had driven home that day as always, he said, and hadn't left his shack till he went to work the next morning. He hadn't even seen Diane—or anyone else. A nearly empty bottle of whiskey was found in the broom closet at the school, and Kennelly acknowledged he'd been feeling pretty high by the time he left. At home he'd gone on drinking, had passed out about ten o'clock, and hadn't wakened till dawn. Nobody could be found who had noticed him, at the school or elsewhere, between four o'clock Tuesday afternoon and nine Wednesday morning.

As for the handkerchief, he admitted it was his, but he claimed he had lost it somewhere, weeks before. The murderer must have been the one who found it. The scratch? Why, the morning after that big drunk he had been so shaky that he had done it himself while he was trying to shave.

So far, so good: John Larsen read the account with thankfulness that he had let things take their course. Then his heart plummeted like a cannon ball.

Joseph Kennelly was 26 years old. His picture showed a tall, skinny young man with lightish hair receding at the temples. And his car was a dark blue sedan.

Larsen reached his home, walking from the bus like an automaton. He threw the paper and his hat on the nearest chair, went into the bathroom, and locked the door: it was the only room in the house where he could be alone to think. "That you, John?" Kate called; then she saw where he had gone and returned to the kitchen. Dinner was just begun, as usual; he often wondered what on earth she did with herself all day. Sat glued to the TV set, probably, just as she used to sit glued to the radio.

Perched on the toilet seat, Larsen wrestled with his conscience. There was no use telling himself any more that his evidence didn't matter. He had seen Diane Morrison kidnaped, he had seen her kidnaper, and it was not Joseph Kennelly.

He couldn't phone from home—Kate would be on his neck at once. He must make some kind of excuse to call from outside. He played again with the idea of telling her. No, that was hopeless; he knew Kate.

She tried the doorknob.

"For gosh sake," she called, "what you got the door locked for? You sick or something?"

"I'm all right," he mumbled, and turned the key.

"I never saw such a man! Never a word out of you when you come home—you might think you didn't

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have a wife. I'm just a servant around here, to make your meals and look after you. Locking yourself in, like I was a stranger! Here I am, all day alone, working my fingers off—"

"What do you want me to talk about? I'm tired."

"And maybe *I'm* not, huh?"

"Let's not fight, Kate," he said wearily. An inspiration came to him. "I've got a fierce headache. If dinner isn't ready, I think I'll walk down to the drug store and get something for it."

"Wait till you've eaten," she said, placated. "That'll make you feel better." She made a conscious effort to achieve a friendly tone. "I was just looking at the paper. Gee, that's awful about that kid, isn't it? I'm glad they got the man. People like that ought to be fried in oil."

"How do you know he's the right one?" he couldn't keep himself from asking.

Kate flared up instantly.

"Well, so I guess you know more than the police, Mr. Smarty! If he wasn't the one did it, why'd they arrest him? They don't arrest anybody till they've got the goods on 'em—anybody can tell you that."

"I guess so," he said feebly, and started to set the table before she told him to.

He did have a headache, and no wonder. Kate's words started him thinking again. She was wrong; they *had* arrested an innocent man. But by that very token, they could never convict him. His mind flitted to the police laboratories he had read about. The hairs and fibers from the girl's clothing would belong to another man, a burly middle-aged man with thick dark hair, whoever he was. There were doubtless lots of other scientific findings he knew nothing about, and they'd all point away from Kennelly. The janitor might be indicted by the grand jury on what they'd got, but he'd never come to trial—they were sure to find the man who really did it.

And without John Larsen's sticking his fool neck out, to no end but his own ruin.

He didn't go out to phone.

The grand jury did indict Kennelly, and he was held without bail in the county jail. Larsen thought about him a good deal, though the sharp impact of that terrible day was growing dimmer. Tough luck for the guy, to be in prison all this time for something he didn't do. But from all accounts he was no good anyway, and a good scare might straighten him out. Any time now they would find they didn't have enough to try him on, or something would turn up that would lead them to the real criminal—though Larsen realized they wouldn't be looking very hard for any other suspect while they thought they had the guilty man.

Kennelly had a good lawyer—a

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prosperous uncle had turned up from somewhere and was paying the bill. Lawrence Prather, the lawyer's name was; he'd been defense attorney in a number of local murder cases and nearly always got his client off. Kennelly would be sure to be acquitted, if he was ever tried.

The date was set for the trial.

Larsen persuaded himself that if there had been the slightest doubt in his mind of the man's acquittal he would have sacrificed himself and gone to Prather with his story. But there wasn't any doubt. He heard the fellows talking about the case in the store, heard people sometimes in the bus: it was exciting a lot of interest. Everybody predicted Kennelly would go free, though everybody took it for granted he was guilty. Some of them were just cynical about justice; some of them thought you couldn't get a conviction on circumstantial evidence alone.

Sometimes, shivering, John Larsen imagined his interview with the defense lawyer. There would be no point in his going to him if he weren't willing to be a witness. And he could hear the prosecutor cross-examining him at the trial.

"And just how did you happen to be at that particular spot at that particular moment, Mr. Larsen?"

There'd be nobody to back him up; it would be just his word against everybody's. The prosecution might make it out that he was a friend of Kennelly's, or had been bribed to toss in this red herring; that he'd made the whole thing up. They might even suspect, or pretend to suspect, that he was covering up not for Kennelly but for himself. The people in that lunch room could identify him; he'd been in Belleville that afternoon. He'd be cleared, of course; but by that time, with all the notoriety, his goose would be cooked.

He stayed away from Prather's office. Kennelly's trial began in October.

Larsen couldn't go, naturally; he had to work. But he followed every word in print. He couldn't keep his mind on anything else. Sims caught him talking about it to a customer, and got angry. "We want people to think about rugs in here, not murders," he said. "If you can't attend to your work, Larsen—" Larsen apologized humbly and watched his step.

He was amazed and frightened by the public excitement. It took almost a week to get a jury. Kennelly was booed and yelled at as he was taken to and from court. The sex murder of a young girl was the worst crime imaginable, and people wanted somebody punished for it. Larsen shuddered at the thought of daring to deprive them of their prey. It wasn't safe even to say aloud that he believed Joseph Kennelly might be innocent.

As the trial progressed, Larsen began having nightmares. He

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couldn't eat and was losing weight. Even Kate noticed and nagged him about it. Like everyone else, she was following the trial closely, and every night she wanted to talk it over. She *knew* Kennelly was guilty, and the electric chair was too good for him. If he went free, he ought to be lynched.

"Oh, shut up!" her husband finally shouted at her.

"I suppose you're sorry for him!" she retorted. "Maybe you wish *you* could do something like that and get away with it!"

Larsen went into the bathroom to keep from answering her.

He waited in vain, during the prosecution, for any mention of hairs or textile fibers; apparently either none had been found or they were being ignored because they did not implicate Kennelly. Nobody said anything about fingerprints or bloodstains in the car, either—doubtless for the same reason. An expert witness did prove that fragments of gravel taken from the seams of the defendant's shoes had come from the quarry, but then Kennelly had often visited the place, which was near his own home. If there were no witnesses to prove Kennelly's alibi, neither were there any to disprove it. The boys from the school who testified to his remarks about Diane had only vague generalities to offer. Larsen began to feel the load lifting from him.

But the defense was little more than a formality. Kennelly himself was his only witness, and he made a poor one—confessedly drunk all through the crucial period. No attempt was made to claim Kennelly was insane, as Larsen had hoped for. Prather gave a strong closing speech, pointing out the lack of direct evidence, pleading that no testimony had actually proved his client's guilt.

But then District Attorney Holcombe pulled out all the stops—denouncing the janitor, exposing his sorry record, calling him "a creature in human form, a vile, vicious rat." The most damning thing of all was that handkerchief. "I just don't believe in coincidences like that," said Holcombe sarcastically. "I'll tell you what I do believe—I believe that poor girl pulled the handkerchief out of Kennelly's pocket while she struggled with him for her honor and her life. And I believe she scratched his face in her feeble attempt to fight back, to escape from the monster who was attacking her."

The audience in the courtroom applauded, and had to be threatened with eviction.

In his charge to the jury Judge Stith tried to be neutral, but the jury could see which way he leaned. They leaned the same way; they remembered vividly the photographs of Diane's pitiful little corpse. Many of them had daughters of their own. Somebody had to be punished for the fiendish crime.

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They brought in a verdict of guilty on both counts, kidnaping and murder. It took only three ballots, the foreman told reporters afterward, to bring to their senses a couple of sentimental fools holding out for a reasonable doubt.

But the judge *can't* condemn him to death, Larsen thought wildly. He can't, just on circumstantial evidence. The man will be given a life sentence at the most, and that means he'll be out on parole eventually. That much won't hurt him, a ne'er-do-well like him.

The judge sentenced Kennelly to the electric chair. He had daughters too.

But there's always an appeal, thought Larsen desperately. The appeal would be granted. Kennelly would have another trial, and by that time the truth would surely have come out.

"For heaven's sake, stop *fussing!*" Kate said a dozen times an evening. "What on earth's the matter with you lately? And you're smoking too much, John. I won't have it—you're spending a fortune on cigarettes!"

The appeal was denied.

The District Attorney told the papers he was pleased. "Death is too good for a human snake like Kennelly," he said.

Prather did not carry the appeal to the State Supreme Court. "No grounds," he explained.

There *were* grounds. Larsen could furnish them.

Twice he got as far as starting to dial Prather's office. Then he realized all that it would mean, and hung up. Wait and see, he told himself. These things drag on for years, one reprieve after another.

"And why have you delayed so long in bringing me this information, Mr. Larsen?" he could hear the defense lawyer saying.

It would be useless to throw himself on the man's mercy, to beg him to follow up the clue and leave John Larsen out of it. Without his testimony the new evidence would mean nothing. It might mean nothing now, anyway. At the very beginning, when Kennelly was first arrested—or before that—it would have been of use. Now he would only involve himself, he kept telling himself, with small chance of helping Kennelly.

If only there were somebody—anybody in the world—to whom he could tell everything, who would advise him and protect him and make things come out right!

Kennelly was in the death row at the State penitentiary. The date for his execution was set for three months away.

Then it was two months.

Then one.

Prather took Kennelly's uncle, his only relative, to the governor. The governor was running for reelection the next November. He wasn't reprieving a man convicted

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of the sex murder of a teen-age girl.

Then it was one week.

Then it was two days.

John Larsen had lost twenty pounds. He was afraid to sleep; once he screamed in a nightmare and woke Kate. He hardly noticed her nagging any more.

"If you're sick, go to a doctor."

"I'm not sick."

"You think I'm a fool? There's *something* wrong with you. What have you been doing, John?" She cast about for possibilities. "John, you tell me!" Suddenly she burst into tears. "I know what it is, and I ain't going to stand for it. You've got some other woman on your mind! If you think, after twenty-seven years, I'll let you—"

Larsen laughed. It wasn't a pretty sound.

Crazy plans flitted through his brain. He would go to Belleville, he would hunt until he found the dark-haired man, he would force the murderer to confess.

All nonsense.

There was no last-minute reprieve. In his heart Larsen knew he hadn't really expected one. Kennelly went to the chair on schedule, shouting his innocence with his last breath.

Reading every painful word of the newspaper story, John Larsen stood at last face to face with the bare truth.

Perhaps he could not have prevented the murder of the girl—though he might have if he had acted at once. But he had done enough.

He had let a man die, in order to hold on to a job he loathed and a wife he hated. He, John Larsen, had murdered Joseph Kennelly, whom he had never seen, as surely as that unknown man had murdered Diane Morrison.

He was a murderer, and murderers ought to die. But he hadn't had the courage to save Kennelly, and he didn't begin to have the courage to die himself. All he could do was to endure, to the last limit of endurance.

At the sight of his face that evening, Kate's words froze on her lips. He picked at his dinner in silence. Immediately after he went to bed. He slept the clock around, in the heavy, dreamless sleep of an exhausted animal.

In the middle of the next morning he was displaying a rug to a customer. Suddenly he dropped it and stiffened.

He began to scream: "I did it! I did it! I did it!"

It took two men to subdue him until the ambulance came . . .

And near Belleville a heavy man with a shock of dark hair, a harmless "character" whom everybody knew and nobody ever noticed, prowled the lonely country roads in his old black car, his eyes alert for a good-looking girl walking alone . . .

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SECOND PRIZE WINNER

First, about the title: MALICE IN WONDERLAND *(a brilliant mystery title) was first conceived by Nicholas Blake, and he used it as the title of one of his detective novels, published in London in 1940. Curiously enough, the American publisher changed the title—to* THE SUMMER CAMP MYSTERY*—and we have often wondered why. When it occurred to us that "Malice in Wonderland" was the perfect title for Rufus King's prize-winning story, we wrote to Mr. Blake and asked if he had any objection to our using his title. In a gracious letter Mr. Blake replied that he didn't mind in the least—for which we now extend our sincere thanks.*

Now, about the story: again Rufus King takes us back to the none too peaceful environs of Halcyon, Florida . . . When Alice Wickershield was nine years old, the world around her was a wonderland, and she believed in witches and elves and magic spells. Eleven years later, the magic still held her in thrall . . . dangerously.

MALICE IN WONDERLAND

by RUFUS KING

WHEN ALICE WICKERSHIELD WAS a little girl of nine and still believed in all the childhood wonderlands with their fantasy inhabitants, she was given a birthday party by an old woman whom she firmly considered to be a witch.

Alice frequently remarked to her best friend Elsie Grunwald, "The tip of Mrs. Fleury's nose almost touches her chin, and that is a sign."

Elsie, who was of a similar age but completely disillusioned as to the fey, would answer practically, "That is because she hates wearing false teeth."

There the matter would drop until some later event would again bring Mrs. Fleury under scrutiny. Naturally, with Mrs. Fleury being the hostess, the birthday party brought the subject of her cabalistic specialty into focus once more.

Alice lived with her father (her mother was dead) in a house of Early-Boom design in the town of Halcyon, on the Florida coast to the north of Miami. Their neighbors

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on the west were the Grunwalds, whose only child Elsie was Alice's best friend; and on the other side was the sorceress with her old-fashioned, galleried home appropriately shrouded in dank grounds of somber tropical plantings.

The birthday party was in late June and as school was over for the season, the festivities were able to get under way shortly after the noon hour with a series of mildly competitive games under the palm and ficus trees that smothered the grounds with their shade. It was at the conclusion of the games and the distribution of prizes with each of the children miraculously having won one, that luncheon was served on the patio and Mrs. Fleury's witchery meshed into gear and determined, eleven years later, the question of Alice's fate.

Dessert for the luncheon was a delicious treat put up especially for Mrs. Fleury by a local company. It consisted of ice-cream tropical fish of various flavors and colors with each mold resting artistically on a foamy wave of spun sugar. At the side of each plate with its chill confection was a cracker bonbon, or snapper, that went bang when its ends were sharply pulled and which contained a favor and a strip of paper on which was printed a motto that was presumed to shed a prophetic light on the puller's future.

"Children," Mrs. Fleury said, while these final temptations were being placed on the table, "I am going to command a test for your powers of self-control—Jefferson Hollingsworth, put down that cracker bonbon until you hear what I have to say."

"This is *it*," whispered Alice to Elsie. "Look at her chin."

Mr. Fleury waited until Jefferson Hollingsworth, a handsome youngster with liquid chestnut eyes, reluctantly replaced his snapper beside a frozen version of a pistachio-and-raspberry carp.

"I am going to ask that each little guest take his or her cracker bonbon home, and that you do not tear it open until some moment of the most *desperate nature* may come to you during your lifetimes. As you know, the crackers conceal a printed motto and it is my wish for you—and for Alice in particular because it is her birthday anniversary—that the message conveyed in the motto shall guide you during this future crisis of either joy or sorrow to do the right, the happy thing."

"She is asking one hell of a lot from kids," Harold Grunwald said to his wife Sidonia after Elsie had returned from the party and reported the odd incident. "I'd say the old bat has lost her marbles."

"Well," Sidonia laughed, "it was too much for Elsie, and where that child gets her I.Q. from I wouldn't know. She produced a logical enough crisis out of a hat."

"She gets her I.Q. from me. At her age I had mastered the Morse code in preparation for becoming an in-

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greatest will power her own tears of torture and doubt.

"No, she isn't, Mrs. Grunwald. She was put under a spell by Mrs. Fleury and that's the end of her."

"A spell, Alice?" Sidonia repeated as her eyes narrowed speculatively that herein might lie some clue, however preposterous, to the fate of her lost child. "What do you mean by a spell, dear?"

"Mrs. Fleury is a witch and Elsie disobeyed her *express command* by opening her cracker bonbon on such a silly excuse. A stomach ache is not a crisis."

Alice left the interview, taking with her the doll's unfinished ball gown with its needle and length of unused thread still stuck in lemonade-colored satin. She wrapped the dress around her own cracker bonbon, as both seemed to be linked in their special magical field, and returned them to the treasure chest where they were to lie fallow in their diablerie for many years to come.

When Hal Grunwald came home that night after a harrowing day spent with the police, the sheriff's deputies, and the road patrols, all of whom were searching for Elsie during this second day of her disappearance, Sidonia told him what Alice had said about Mrs. Fleury being a witch and he hit the ceiling.

He then collapsed dog-tired into a chair and held his hot head in his hands and said, "Oh, my God, Sid, you could listen to childish drivel while we're moving heaven and earth to find her."

"I'd listen to any sort of drivel if I thought it would do any good. After all, Hal, what *do* we know about Mrs. Fleury?"

"We know what she has told us."

"That's exactly what I mean about our life here. The friends we make come from all over the country and we don't know a thing about them except what they tell us themselves."

Sidonia, who had been holding her control by superhuman effort during the past two tragical days and nights, grew hysterical, and her voice broke in odd high notes.

"We exercise more judgment about our servants than we do about our friends," she went on with those shrillish overtones. "We check servants, look up references—why, they even have police cards of identity! But our friends? We let our children associate with them and we don't know *what they are*. Mrs. Fleury? From Cleveland, she says—widowed—her husband left her well off—and we smile and swallow it. She might be a mass poisoner for all we know! Alice claims she's a witch and you laugh. Well, a child's judgment might be better than our judgment. A child's eyes see things clearly, not through a fog of polite social conventions."

"Sid, knock it off, will you? We're both carrying all the traffic will bear without getting sidetracked into black magic."

The ransom note came that night.

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With the vivid ears of childhood, Alice arranged all the fragments of overheard talks between her father and his friends into a factual whole. A ransom had been demanded, $50,000 had been paid, and Elsie still had not returned home.

"She can't," Alice said to Sidonia when they met by chance at the hibiscus border that divided the Wickershield and Grunwald properties. "She can't come back because she's dead."

"Darling, don't say it. Oh, don't even think it!" Sidonia plunged through the hedge and getting down on her knees gripped Alice's hands so hard that the bones felt all together. "You must tell me—I am begging this of you, Alice—isn't there something you know? Something real?"

"Witches are real."

Sidonia looked at the child searchingly, half convinced in the torture-ridden uncertainties of her cracking mind that the fateful motto just might have had something to do with their loss.

"You really believe that, Alice, don't you?"

"It's dangerous not to."

"Then destroy it. Burn your cracker bonbon. Get it now and burn it up."

"I can't."

"Why not?"

"Because it isn't time."

So intense is the power of public opinion that Mrs. Fleury began feeling it on all sides—to the extent that she concluded the only answer lay in selling her place and leaving Halcyon.

The children beleaguered her with cries from a safe distance of *witch-witch-witch,* and the elders forming her circle of friends were electrically artificial in their greetings and perfunctory smiles.

Even the police thoroughly checked her whereabouts during the hour when Elsie had been sewing by herself in the gazebo. They handled the inquiry discreetly of course, and no mention of it was made public officially; but the fact was shortly general knowledge that Mrs. Fleury had an ironclad alibi. She had been undergoing the rack of a hair and facial treatment at the shop of Halcyon's best and most talkative beautician.

In Alice's opinion this absolute alibi was futile for a witch, they being a breed notoriously famous for their astral ability to be in two different places at the same time, and she announced as much to the other children who promptly stepped up their campaign of torment instead of dropping it.

Mrs. Fleury was unable to fight back, any more than she could have fought the invisible vapors from a swamp with her bare fists. Fortunately she found a ready buyer for her home in Dr. Jessup Hollingsworth, whose adopted son Jefferson had had to be cautioned at the birthday party against a premature snapping of his cracker bonbon.

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Since coming to Halcyon over a year ago, Dr. Hollingsworth had been living with Jeff in the sterile splendor of a beach hotel. The doctor had reached the age of retirement and wanted to settle down.

"I want roots," he said to Haidee Glosser in her real estate office in town. "Not so much for myself as for Jefferson. My wife's tragic death made it impossible to continue living in our former home in New York."

"I understand," Miss Glosser murmured with sympathy while mentally pocketing a fat commission for the Fleury estate.

Within less than a week the deal was closed. Mrs. Fleury moved to the west coast and settled in St. Petersburg which was, so far as east coast Floridians were concerned, as far away as the moon.

And Alice acquired a new best friend.

She and young Jeff Hollingsworth were classmates in elementary school, it was true, but there had been none of the special affinity that goes with a friendship on a next-door basis, once the initial ice of propinquity is melted—and at the age of nine the thaw comes fast.

"How do you like being adopted?" Elsie asked during the preliminaries.

"There's not much feeling about it," Jeff said.

"What happened to your adopted mother?"

"Foster mother."

"Foster. Thank you."

"Don't mention it. She was killed by a hit-and-run driver right after my adoption papers went through. I only remember her looks."

"What did she look like?"

"Like anybody."

"What are you going to be, Jeff when you grow up?"

"A botanist."

"Why?"

"Because plants and trees and flowers are important. They can be like people, only nicer. I've got leaves and specimens of about almost everything around here. Each one is dried and labeled from where I found it."

"Have you ever met any elves while you were gathering them?"

"No."

"Do you believe in them, Jeff?"

"Maybe."

Inevitably, as the years of childhood and the ensuing 'teens dreamed by, Alice and Jeff drew more seriously toward each other in their affections, and only Sidonia Grunwald of the people who knew them tried to put a damper on the intimacy.

Sidonia had never given up, nor would she, no matter how earnestly Hal begged her to resign herself to the inevitable. Elsie was gone but they, he said, were left and had their lives together to be lived.

"She isn't gone," Sidonia would say with a kind of fierceness. "She's some place."

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Yes, Hal would think in his own emptiness, Elsie was some place all right, and a stomach-wrenching vision would come to him of their darling's small bones lying unshrived in some secret desolation of the everglades or under the water of rockpits or hyacinth-smothered canals, year after lonely year in their whitening.

"I cannot get it out of my head," Sidonia would say wildly, "that that place, that that woman had something to do with it."

"I wish you'd stop poking around over there. I know you do at night, and apart from the fact that I'm sure it annoys Doctor Hollingsworth, it just isn't healthy, Sid."

"You can't be healthy with an empty heart."

This fixed idea formed the basis for Sidonia's corroding reaction to the romance between Alice, whom she feverishly loved because there seemed to cling to the girl a lingering of her lost Elsie, and young Jeff. Actually, Sidonia was a little deranged on the subject, feeling herself constantly drawn to the old Fleury grounds (she never thought of it as the Hollingsworth place), and it was true, as Hal said, that she would steal over there and search around beneath its dank canopies especially when the moon was full.

She had convinced herself of the half-demented syllogism that the grounds were under a curse, therefore Jeff and his foster father since they lived within the influence of their baleful star, were also accursed. Sidonia wanted no part of this disastrous magic to rub off on Alice, not even through the medium of young love.

The college years brought no hiatus in the serious intentions between Alice and Jeff. She went to Barry in Miami Shores and he attended the University of Miami in nearby Coral Gables. There Jeff delved deeply into the structure, physiology, and distribution of the members of the vegetable kingdom, with an ultimate aim of specializing in plant morphology. With this broadened knowledge Jeff, among later interests, had carefully emended his collection of boyhood specimens which were still methodically kept on file in the small laboratory he had equipped at home.

Rather because she wanted to be near him than from any curiosity about botany, Alice would often stay with Jeff in the laboratory while he worked, and one day when he was reclassifying some specimens of his childhood collection, her interest was caught by a closely set cluster of fine slender branches.

"It looks like a little broom, Jeff."

"It should. It's *hexenbesen,* more commonly known as witches'-broom."

The name aroused stirrings of many years ago.

"Did you find it here? When Mrs. Fleury owned the place?"

"Not actually."

He had picked it up, Jeff told her,

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from his foster father's bedroom floor in the beach hotel they had then been staying at. He imagined it must have fallen from a cuff of Dr. Hollingsworth's trousers when he had taken them off the night before.

"I remember asking him about it. It's an unusual find and I wanted to trace its source. It's an outgrowth caused by a plant parasite or fungus."

"Did you?"

"Did I what?"

"Trace its source?"

"Not until after we'd moved here."

Dr. Hollingsworth had told him when questioned, that he might have picked it up while looking over the grounds with the real estate agent just before purchasing them.

"I finally located it," Jeff said, "after we'd moved in and I'd remembered that witches'-brooms sometimes appear on ferns—low enough to be caught in a cuff."

"So it did come from here. Funny."

"Why funny?"

"Don't you remember our thinking old Mrs. Fleury was a witch? At least I certainly did."

"All kids think crazy stuff."

"I know it and I realize now what a little fool I was about it. I'd like to see Mrs. Fleury again and tell her I'm sorry for having caused her to be pestered, for making her give up her home, really. Jeff—I wonder if she's still alive?"

"What makes you say that?"

"Just a feeling. A funny feeling, Jeff."

They were to be married shortly after graduation and Mr. Wickershield, Alice's father, finally persuaded Sidonia in her self-assumed role of proxy mother to Alice to handle all the intricate arrangements for the wedding.

"I still feel," Sidonia said to Hal after she had reluctantly consented to Mr. Wickershield's urging, "that it is a mistake. It's—it's sinister, malign."

"Oh, please, Sid!"

Hal had grown stout and comfortable, and instead of continuing to be sympathetic he was getting irritated with what he thought of as Sidonia's perpetual mania and her occasional Ophelia-like nocturnal driftings around the old Fleury grounds. He had loved their lost Elsie with all his heart and he still loved her memory but grief cannot live forever. If it did, he thought philosophically, all life on earth would die.

Dr. Hollingsworth, in his role of foster father, arranged the bachelor dinner for Jeff at a beach club of correct splendor, the groom's gift for the best man and the ushers being platinum cuff links from Tiffany, the food and the wines compatible; and Jeff, whose familiarity with champagne was only a nodding basis, got socked straight into left field. Unfortunately he remained on his feet, his talk was intelligible, and

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his good night to the doorman who brought his car sounded (as the doorman later testified) all right.

A milkman making his delivery shortly after sunup to the rear of Dr. Hollingsworth's house found Sidonia lying crumpled under the hibiscus that edged the driveway to the garage. He was not a man to panic, thanks to Korea, and having determined that she was still alive, he roused the house. All that is, but Jeff who was still sprawled fully dressed across his bed in stuporous sleep.

. . . *In the news of local interest* (a Fort Lauderdale newscaster announced) *the Halcyon police report an alleged drunk-driving accident on the grounds of Dr. Jessup Hollingsworth, formerly the old Fleury estate. The victim is a Mrs. Grunwald, a nearby neighbor whose daughter Elsie was kidnaped a decade ago and presumably killed by her abductor after a ransom of $50,000 had been paid. The old kidnaping case remains unsolved. According to her husband and her close friends, this tragedy continued to prey on Mrs. Grunwald and caused her to take walks at night around the Hollingsworth grounds which, they say, she associated in some fashion with her child's disappearance. The police believe that she was on such an excursion last night when Dr. Hollingsworth's adopted son Jefferson drove home from a bachelor dinner in a drunken condition and struck her. James Cray, 2714 Northeast Hempstead Court, who delivers the morning milk, found her lying under an hibiscus hedge where she had been flung by the impact. She is now at Memorial and her condition is critical . . .*

The world came to an end but Alice did not break down. With Jeff released under a $5000 bail bond, Sidonia's life spun on with a thread above the valley of death, Alice would make Jeff sit out the foreboding hours with her in the privacy of the Grunwalds' alamanda-draped gazebo where they were reasonably sheltered from the press and even from their friends. When evening fell each would go home to face the night with such courage as could be summoned.

"I don't suppose," Alice's father said to her, cupping the mouthpiece of a telephone on the second night following the accident, "that you would care to talk with her? She's peculiarly insistent."

"Who, Papa?"

"That woman who used to live next to us. You remember, a Mrs. Fleury. She's calling from St. Petersburg."

Alice rushed to the phone.

"Alice, dear child," Mrs. Fleury's (again) familiar voice came from the receiver, "I have been reading all about it and you will think me a silly old woman but I felt compelled

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to telephone. I want to ask you just one question."

"Yes, Mrs. Fleury?"

"Call me a superstitious old fool if you wish—I remember how you were childishly positive I was a witch," Mrs. Fleury paused to give a forgiving, paperish little laugh, "and perhaps I *am* one, because while I was reading about your fiancé's critical predicament, the most singular, almost clairvoyant vision popped into my mind. It made me feel exactly like one of the weird sisters and I simply leaped on my witch's broom and flew to call you up. Now tell me, Alice, do you remember the birthday party?"

"Of course, Mrs. Fleury."

"Do you recall the cracker bonbons and my nonsensically mysterious instructions about them?"

"Yes."

"Well, do you by the wildest chance still have yours?"

"Yes."

"Is it still unopened?"

"Yes."

"Then open it now."

And the wire went dead.

Alice left her father still standing near the telephone, with Mr. Wickershield silently wondering just what the call had been all about in order to have affected his daughter in such an odd manner.

"I swear to you, Hal," he told Harold Grunwald afterward, "she positively drifted from the room as if she'd been put under a spell. . . ."

The cardboard treasure chest with its Christmas wrappings of holly gold and stars had for years been lying undisturbed in the bottom drawer of a dresser in Alice's room.

Alice got it out and put it on a desk where the shaft from a metal cone-shaded lamp made startling the colors' holiday brilliance. With a reluctance that combined the fear ever present when brushing the unnatural, and a hope that she did not dare feel too strongly because of the impossible qualities that draped it, she took out the cracker bonbon in its covering of the doll's ball gown, and pushed the treasure chest aside.

Then in her sudden eagerness Alice felt a finger pricked by the needle which was still caught in what had been Elsie's last stitch, and a drop of blood stained a pea-sized circle of red on the lemonade-colored satin of the little dress. Alice removed the dress and with no further ado took both ends of the cracker bonbon and pulled them sharply apart. The report, to her now more adult ears, produced but a trivial effect.

With a scissors she slit the white paper cover, and discarding a gay red paper hat and a miniature metal fire engine, she came at last to the strip of paper on which the motto was printed. An ugly wave of disappointment engulfed Alice as she read it. She had been expecting something truly prophetic—like Elsie's *Open, locks, whoever knocks!*

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which she later had learned had been out of dire context.

The motto dropped from her fingers and came to rest on the ball gown beside the needle. Beside the drop of blood. She had hoped so much, Alice now admitted to herself—she had been hoping all along with her desperate heart for some sign—and now all her hopes had come to this childlike ending of—of—

Her eyes darted from the motto to the blood drop, to the needle, to the line of stitches, in the last one of which the needle had been left. Clear under the cone-shafted light they were visible in their good straight line. There was only one thing the matter with it, Alice decided critically. The line ran diagonally across the front panel of the gown and therefore, from a dressmaker's point of view, not only served no purpose but was the act of a seamstress gone suddenly mad.

Never would Elsie, as Alice remembered her lost best friend, with her fine capabilities in so many of the childhood arts, have been guilty of such botchery. Unless it were purposely done. And rarely had anything ever been done by Elsie that lacked purpose.

Alice's pulse quickened as a ripple of strange excitement caught her brain, and she examined more closely the misplaced line of stitching. Not only was the line misplaced but the stitches themselves were uneven in their spacing—another unthinkable thing for Elsie to have done.

Unless, again, it were *purposely* done.

So steeped was Alice in the flood made by the years rolled back that Elsie became real—with their best-friend loveship and all their secrets of shattering importance and their fearless preparations for facing the entrancing vistas of adult life to come. Yes, Alice remembered, their last projected career had been to become Mata Hari, with all her fascinating background of international intrigue.

And for which they had both learned the Morse code.

Her eyes flew to the line of unevenly spaced stitches. Dots and dashes, sewn in chartreuse thread on lemonade-colored satin. The pencil in her fingers automatically put the letters down on the spread-open white paper wrapper of the cracker bonbon. *DRHOLCRZYHLPM*—then nothing more.

So intense, so feverish, was Alice's excitement that little meant anything to her but that here was Elsie's last message on earth, and that within it undoubtedly lay a clue to her disappearance and, according to Mrs. Fleury, a help in Jeff's and Alice's present deadly crisis.

Taking the ball gown with her and leaving the rest of the magical properties on the desk, with her heart going suffocatingly in hopeful thumps, Alice ran from her room and out of the house with no

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thought in her head other than to find and tell Jeff.

A lamp was lighted on the lower front gallery of the old Fleury house, and Dr. Hollingsworth was seated beside it in a wicker chair. He was smoking a cigar and reading.

"Alice, dear girl!" he said as she rushed up the steps and paused breathless before him. His professional training took a clinical look at her eyes, at the tremor in her fingers that held, as if with an ague, the edge of a piece of satin. "You have had a shock."

"Yes, Doctor—this."

He took it from her outstretched hand.

"It looks like—it's a doll's dress, isn't it?"

"It's the one Elsie was sewing on in the gazebo just before she disappeared."

"Elsie? Oh, of course—the little Grunwald girl."

"I must show it to Jeff!"

"But why?"

"There is a message stitched on it in Morse code. We had both learned the code together. It's Elsie's last message, Doctor—"

"Amazing!"

Alice took the gown from his fingers and said, "I'll go right in, if you don't mind, and tell Jeff."

"He isn't home."

Delay was a blow.

"Do you know where he is?"

"No. Jeff has been taking long walks these nights. Alone. Trying to knock himself out physically so that he can get some sleep. Alice, sit down. Since you can't tell Jeff, tell me."

This Alice did, from the birthday party down to the call from Mrs. Fleury and the motto and the stitches in Morse.

"What was your father's reaction? Is he getting in touch with the sheriff?"

"He knows nothing about it. It hit me so hard, Doctor, that I simply raced over here to tell Jeff. If I'd met Father on the way out I'd naturally have told him, but I didn't."

"What did the message say, Alice?"

"I haven't decoded it yet," Alice said, "because I'm waiting to do it with Jeff. I'm certain it will give us a clue to Elsie's kidnaping, and I know this sounds fantastic but I honestly believe that Mrs. Fleury is right and that it will help Jeff, too. Do you think that sentimental, Doctor?"

"Not that you feel that way, no. As I recall it, you were firmly convinced that Mrs. Fleury was a witch. I'd simply say that your subconscious was getting in a few old licks."

"I'm almost ready to believe in her sorcery again, Doctor. Take her telephoning, the cracker bonbon and the motto—she even *spoke* of a witch's broom—oh, it's not only Mrs. Fleury herself, it's the whole atmosphere of this place where she lived."

"Witch's broom?"

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"Yes. Witches'-broom is a growth that looks like a little broom. Of course you don't remember, but you caught some in the cuff of your trousers when you were looking over the grounds here with the real estate agent, and Jeff found it on the floor of your bedroom in the hotel."

"Yes, now I do remember him asking me about it, and I remember that when he moved in here he located the spot it came from. A clump of ferns. Serpent ferns, I think he called them."

"Do you remember where they are?"

"I believe so, in a general way. They're back quite a distance in this tropical jungle. Why?"

"I want to go there. Could we go there, Doctor? Now? While we're waiting for Jeff?"

"I suppose we could. But why?"

"I don't know why. This is crazy, but it's almost as if Mrs. Fleury were urging me to."

Dr. Hollingsworth looked at Alice judicially, as if he were trying to determine a proper course of therapy for her very evident emotional state.

"You are overstrung, Alice. The walk might be good for you at that."

"Then you'll show me?"

"I'll get a flashlight," Dr. Hollingsworth said.

Mr. Wickershield had been in the library selecting a book for a quiet hour's reading when he was conscious, as he thought, of a screen door slamming. Alice? Scarcely. Alice did not allow screen doors to slam. Still, that phone call from Mrs. Fleury had—just what had it done? Sort of knocked her for a loop, he decided.

Mr. Wickershield left the library and rapped on Alice's door, then went inside. She wasn't there. The only light on was the desk lamp with its cone of brilliance from the metal shade. Inescapably, his attention was drawn to the doll and to the flattened wrapper of the cracker bonbon. He went to the desk and he sat down. Clearly, vividly, as though it were today, recognition came and he recalled the whole grim episode of the birthday party, the kidnaping of Elsie, and of that child of nine who had believed in the wondrous and was now his grown-up daughter Alice.

Something was missing. Of course, the doll dress that Elsie had been sewing and in which Alice had wrapped the cracker bonbon. Had she taken it with her when, judging from the screen door slam, she had pelted from the house? To show Jeff? Most likely.

The end of the motto strip was exposed beneath the cracker bonbon wrapper and he pulled it out. He reread it. Thoughtfully, he read it again.

Mr. Wickershield had served in Army Intelligence during the war, and his brain was experienced in

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appraisal and deduction well beyond that of an untrained man. Alice had found some clue in the doll's dress to Elsie's disappearance and had rushed over to discuss it with Jeff —that line of deduction was almost obvious.

He then recalled the children's plunge into Morse code—so the connection between the motto and some probable stitching on the doll dress and the penciled letters on the paper wrapper suggested itself at once.

His experience with decoding in Intelligence had been superficial, but he saw immediately that this message—that must, he thought, have been stitched with such haste and yet such care, and under God knew what a pall of terror—was scarcely a code at all.

Ice sluggished his blood as he read it, and as he started out at a brisk pace for the Grunwald house to pick up Hal.

The flashlight was powerful—one of those two-foot, heavy, cylindrical cases that could throw a beam an eighth of a mile, much farther than was needed for the job on hand.

"Well, there it is," Dr. Hollingsworth said. "The serpent ferns and the witches'-broom. Tell me, Alice, what really made you want to come here? I don't mind admitting that I am interested in extra-sensory perception, but in all actuality I'm an out-and-out realist. Putting Mrs. Fleury's alleged witchery aside, why did you want to come?"

"Because there is something here."

"What?"

"Doctor, I don't know. That it is connected with Elsie I *do* know, even though I don't know the reason."

Alice parted the serpent ferns and took several hesitant steps within the large, lush clump.

"No need to be definite," Dr. Hollingsworth said. "Just tell me what you feel."

"I feel a grave. I feel it is Elsie's, but I can't explain."

Dr. Hollingsworth moved the light shaft from the serpent ferns full upon Alice's face.

"The answer is simple, Alice," he said. "You are standing on it now."

Both Mr. Wickershield and Hal had wasted no time. To reach the steps of the old Fleury house front gallery was but a matter of minutes. Hal knocked on the screen door, through which they could see a dimly lighted stretch of empty hall. They waited a moment, then went inside.

"Anybody home?" Hal shouted, his voice unnaturally loud under the pressure of their dangerous urgency.

A door at the end of the hallway opened and Jeff came out.

"Who's shouting?" he said. "Oh —oh, hello. I've been working in my lab and I thought the house was coming down."

"Where is the Doctor?" Mr. Wickershield asked tensely.

"I left him reading on the gallery

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about an hour ago. I've been shut up in the lab since then. Why?"

"Where's Alice?"

"I've no idea. Why?"

"She ran over here to see you. Ten or fifteen minutes ago."

"Then where is she? I never heard a thing in the lab until your shout. What's the matter? What's happened?"

Mr. Wickershield explained tersely, while blood receded from Jeff's face in an ebbing tide.

"Where would he have taken her?" Mr. Wickershield asked.

"We'll search the grounds," Jeff said.

Pinned like a specimen bug in the harsh shaft of the flashlight, still having no knowledge of what Elsie's last message had meant, but no longer needing that knowledge now that the implication in Dr. Hollingsworth's statement about the grave was so plain, every muscle in Alice strained toward flight. But her control was gone. She stood like a statue among the serpent ferns, marbleized by shock and fright.

"You killed Elsie," she said, in someone else's voice.

"Yes."

"But you had everything. Money —position— Why?"

"I had no money. I had spent the small fortune I killed my wife for. I needed more."

"Your wife—then it wasn't a hit-and-run?"

"No. It was arranged."

"But Elsie—a little child—"

"I suggest you think of her rather in terms of fifty thousand dollars. A sum I have pyramided through legitimate business channels into a comfortable fortune. There was no need to continue with crime. Only Sidonia Grunwald's erratic prying around here offered a threat. Well, an appropriate opportunity presented itself and I took advantage of it."

"You involved Jeff. You are making him pay. Don't you love him? If you don't, if you never have, why did you adopt him?"

"For a front."

"Front?

"Like the flower shops the Chicago gangsters used to run. Gave them a legitimate surface of respectability. Jeff did that for me."

"How?"

"As a son he gave me the desirable standing of being a family man, a good, kind father to a well brought-up boy. A lone bachelor, or a widower, is always an object of speculative curiosity, whereas a father with a child is hardly ever suspected. Having reached my goal, however, Jeff became expendible."

"You arranged it so that they would believe he had hit Mrs. Grunwald."

"Of course. He stopped the car and passed out at the start of the driveway. Sidonia was going on with her act that night. I trailed her as I usually had, heard the car, saw Jeff's condition as he slumped over

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the wheel, and appreciated the perfect setup." Dr. Hollingsworth added matter-of-factly, "Before arranging her in the condition in which she was found I hit her with this flashlight."

Although the moon was at the full its blue-white brightness rinsed but sparsely through the tropical overhead as Jeff led the way.

"Move quietly so as not to startle him," Mr. Wickershield warned, the words thick from dread. "There may still be time."

Shortly, Jeff stopped.

"They're over there," he said. "Step here and you can see the beam from his flashlight—there, through that break in the shrubs."

Mr. Wickershield moved beside Jeff and saw it—saw it focused on Alice's rigid face.

Then saw it go out.

"Run for it!" he said.

It was Jeff who caught Dr. Hollingsworth's upraised arm before the torch could crash down again . . .

The following evening, feeling somewhat like Madame Récamier with her famous levees à la chaise-longue, Alice lay on a bamboo counterpart in the company of her father, Jeff, and Bill Duggan, chief investigator for the sheriff's department. Hal was at Memorial with Sidonia, who had passed the crisis and was given by the doctors a more than excellent chance for complete recovery.

Alice herself was fairly over the effects from the blow of the flashlight that had landed glancingly on her head before Jeff had put an end to the murderous attack.

"Evidence?" Duggan was saying. "We're glutted with it. The District Attorney looks like a canary-stuffed cat. That ransom note, the one the Grunwalds got eleven years ago, was still on file. The B.C.I. boys knew back then that it was written on a blank leaf torn from a book. From some particular book among the hundreds of thousands within the area, so that got them no place. Now it does. Once the message stitched on the doll dress put the finger on him, Dr. Hollingsworth's library was inspected and the leaf was found to have been torn from a book on forensic medicine—a reference work he would have hesitated to throw away, even if he hadn't felt so sure of himself. Even the printing on the note, although he tried to disguise it, has been identified by an expert graphologist as being his."

"Did the witches'-broom help?" Alice asked. "The specimen Jeff kept?"

"Definitely. It puts him at the grave."

"Why do you suppose he picked that special spot?" Jeff asked.

"He told me. It's all down in his statement. He picked the Fleury grounds because, for one thing, they were handy. After a very bad attempt at trying to wheedle Elsie into going to a movie with him, and ob-

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viously frightening her enough by his manner and insistence into stitching her message for help, he killed her. Then he carried her from the gazebo, and the large clump of serpent ferns hid her nicely until he buried her in the center of them that night. Naturally, he could move about freely. There was no earthly reason why any suspicion would point to him."

"Wouldn't the everglades have been safer?" Mr. Wickershield asked. "Some far-off place?"

"He said he thought of that, then he thought that if the body ever were discovered under the ferns, Mrs. Fleury herself would provide an excellent suspect, what with her somewhat odd habits. Of course, he didn't know then that she had a perfect alibi. Nobody knew, until a couple of days later after we had turned up the fact that she was in the beauty shop."

"I can see why he bought the place as soon as it was put up for sale," Mr. Wickershield said. "He wouldn't want other tenants to have it. Their possible ideas on altering the landscaping could conceivably have uncovered the grave. I can even see how he might have got a perverted kick out of it, although Sidonia's prowlings must have kept him somewhat on edge."

"No, they kind of amused him for a while, but the night he fixed up the drunk-driving deal on Jeff was different. He felt it was time to call quits. You see, he'd been tailing her as usual and she did something that night she had never done before. Signed her own death warrant, you might say."

"What was it?"

"She went into the utility room by the garage and came out with a shovel."

Much later at night Duggan got home and told his wife all about it.

"Like a fairy tale," he said. "Only a damn grim one. Take that coded message, and the uncanny way the motto pointed toward the sewing on the doll dress. Here—here's a copy. Mr. Wickershield spotted it right off as simple contraction."

Mrs. Duggan looked at the slip of paper.

DRHOLCRZYHLPM
DR/HOL/CRZY/HLP/M
DOCTOR HOLLINGSWORTH
CRAZY HELP ME

"And the motto?" she asked.

"A stitch in time saves nine."

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